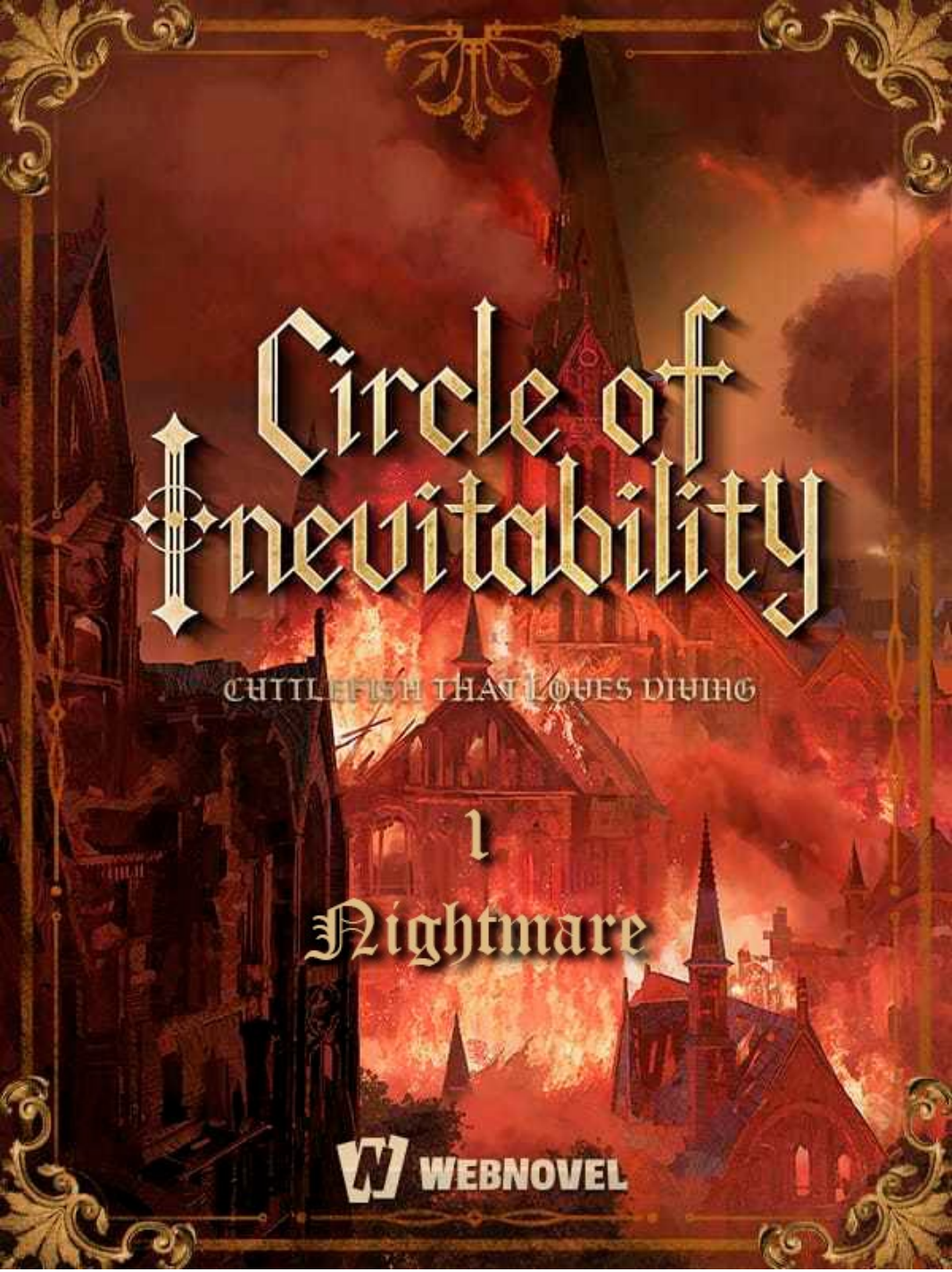
Circle of Inevitability
CUTTLEFISH THAT LOVES DIVING
1
Nightmare
WEBNOVEL

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Chapter 1: Foreigners

A price is always exacted for what fate bestows--adapted from Zweig's Mary Queen of Scots.

"I'm a nobody, with no time to notice the brightness of the sun.

"My parents couldn't help me, and I wasn't highly educated. I had no choice but to make it on my own in the city.

"I'd applied to many jobs, but no one ever hired me. Maybe it's because I'm not good at expressing myself, and I'm not the best communicator. I guess I just haven't shown enough ability.

"Once, I'd eaten two loaves of bread over a three-day period. Hunger kept me up at night. At least I paid a month's rent in advance, so I didn't have to face the cold winter wind outside.

"Finally, I found a job at the hospital's morgue, keeping vigil over the dead.

"Nighttime in the hospital was colder than I could have ever imagined. The corridor's wall lights were out, leaving everything shrouded in darkness. I could barely see my feet, and the only light seeping out was from the rooms.

"Mon Dieu, it reeked of something fierce. The smell of death lingered in the air. And from time to time, we had to help move the bodies into the morgue.

"It wasn't the most glamorous of jobs, but it put bread on the table. Plus, the free time at night allowed me to study. Few people ventured to the morgue, but when they did, they were there delivering bodies or taking them away for cremation. I had to make do without books, as I couldn't afford them, nor did I see any hope of saving up enough for them.

"But I had to thank my predecessor for leaving so suddenly, as it allowed me to get this job.

"I dreamed of working the day shift. Sleeping during the day and being awake at night made my body weak and my head throb."

"One day, a new corpse was brought in.

"From what I'd heard, it's the body of my predecessor who suddenly left.

"I was intrigued by the mysterious disappearance of my predecessor, and as soon as the others left the room, I pulled out the cabinet and quietly opened the body bag.

"He was an old man, with bluish-white skin and wrinkles covering his face. The poor lighting only served to make him look scarier.

"He didn't have much hair. Most of it was white. He had been stripped of his clothes, not even a piece of cloth was left on him.

"As a dead man without a family, the movers couldn't resist the opportunity to cash in on the guy.

"I saw a strange mark on his chest. It was bluish-black. I can't really explain it. The light was too dim at the time.
"I reached out and touched the mark, only to realize there was nothing special about it.
"Looking at my predecessor, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd end up like him when I grew old...
"I promised his body I'd be with him on his last journey, take him to the crematorium and then to the nearest free cemetery. I couldn't have the bureaucrats throwing him in the river or some forsaken land like trash.
"I knew I was gonna 'ave to sacrifice some shut-eye, but Dieu merci it was Sunday the next day. I could catch up on my lost sleep then.
"After saying that, I zipped up the bag and shoved it back in the cabinet.
"The room went darker and the shadows lengthened...
"Since that day, every time I close my eyes, I'm swallowed by a thick fog.
"Something tells me I'm not alone. Something not quite human is coming my way. But nobody will listen. They think I've lost my mind in this job; they say I need a doctor..."
A male customer sitting at the bar looked at the narrator who had suddenly stopped and asked, "And?"
The narrator suddenly stopped his tale, causing a male customer at the bar to take notice. This mid-thirties chap sported a drab duffel coat and pale yellow strides. His hair was slicked back, and he had a rough dark bowler hat by his side.
He seemed run-of-the-mill, like the rest of the punters in the alehouse, with dark locks and piercing blue peepers. Not particularly handsome, but not repugnant either. Nothing about him screamed for attention.
The narrator was a strapping lad in his late teens, with long limbs and chiseled features that could make any lass go weak in the knees. His short, jet-black hair and bright, blue eyes only added to his appeal.
The lad looked wistfully at the empty wine glass in front of him and let out a deep sigh.
"And then?
"Then I quit my job and returned to the countryside so that I can tell you this bullshit," the lad responded with a sly grin spreading across his face.
The male guest was taken aback.
"Were you just pulling our leg?"
"Haha!" Laughter erupted around the bar.
However, the laughter was short-lived as a middle-aged man

looked sternly at the slightly embarrassed customer and remarked, "You ain't from around here, are ya? Lumian spins a different yarn every day. Yesterday, he was a penniless bloke who got dumped by his fiancée, and today, he's a watchman for the dead!"
"Aye, he talks about spending thirty years east of the Serenzo River and then thirty years to the right of it. He's full of hot air, that one!" added another regular at the tavern.
All the men were farmers from the village of Cordu, wearing drab-colored tunics.
The black-haired lad, Lumian, leaned forward on the bar counter and rose to his feet. He flashed a cheeky grin and proclaimed, "As you all know, I ain't the one making this up. My sister pens these tales. She's a writer for some column known as Novel Weekly or other."
With that, Lumian turned around, spread his arms wide, and beamed at the foreign customer.
"Looks like she's crafted quite the tale. I'm sorry you misunderstood."
The unremarkable man in the brown tweed shirt smiled and stood up.
"What an intriguing story. And how might I address you?"
"Isn't it common courtesy to introduce oneself before inquiring of others?" Lumian replied, returning the man's smile.
The foreigner nodded.
"My name is Ryan Koss.
"These are my companions, Valentine and Leah."
The last sentence referred to the man and woman sitting beside him.
Valentine, a man in his late twenties with powdered blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, wore a white vest, a blue tweed jacket, and black trousers. It was evident that he had put considerable effort into his attire, as if he had been priming himself for a special rendezvous.
He had a rather chilly look on his face, not even sparing a glance for the farmers and herders around him.
Leah, on the other hand, was a striking young woman with long, light gray hair tied into an elaborate bun and a white veil perched atop her head.
Her eyes matched her hair and she regarded Lumian with an open smile, clearly amused by their exchange.
In the glow of the gas lamps inside the tavern, the woman named Leah showed off her sharp nose and stunningly curved lips. She was definitely a stunner in the countryside like Cordu.

She wore a snug white pleated cashmere dress with a small off-white coat and a pair of Marseillan boots. There were two tiny silver bells fastened to her veil and boots. They jingled as she walked into the tavern, drawing the attention of many--especially the men.
In their eyes, this was the kind of fashionable getup you'd only see in the big cities, like the provincial capital of Bigorre or even the capital city of Trier.
Lumian gave a nod of acknowledgement to the three foreigners.
"The name's Lumian Lee. You may address me as Lumian."
"Lee?" Leah blurted out.
"What's the matter? Y'all got a problem with my last name?" Lumian asked with a curious look on his face.
Ryan Koss took it upon himself to explain on Leah's behalf, "Your last name is downright frightening. I nearly lost control of my voice just now."
Observing the bewildered expressions of the farmers and herdsmen around him, he continued,
"Folks who have crossed paths with sailors and sea merchants are familiar with a saying that's making the rounds in the Five Seas:
"I'd rather come face to face with pirate Admirals or even kings than run into a bloke named Frank Lee.
"That person's last name is also Lee."
"Is he really that scary?" Lumian inquired.
Ryan shook his head in response.
"I'm not exactly sure, but if such a legend exists, then it can't be far from the truth."
He switched topics and said to Lumian, "Merci for the story. It merits a drink. What do you desire?"
"A glass of La Fée Verte." Lumian didn't beat around the bush and settled back into his seat.
Ryan Koss furrowed his brow.
"'La Fée Verte'... Absinthe?"
"I must remind you, absinthe is harmful to the human body. Such alcohol can lead to insanity and hallucinations."
"I didn't expect the trends of Trier to reach here," Leah chimed in with a grin.
Lumian acknowledged her comment tersely.
"So the people of Trier also enjoy La Fée Verte..."
"For us, life is already tough enough. No need to fret over a little more harm. This drink can calm our minds."
"Alright." Ryan leaned back in his chair and turned to the bartender. "A glass of La Fée Verte and another glass of CÅ"ur Ã ‰picé."

CÅ"ur Ã‰picé was a renowned fruit-based spirit that had been distilled to perfection.
The thin, middle-aged man who had exposed Lumian's lies piped up. "Give me a glass of La Fée Verte too. After all, I was the one who told the truth just now. I can even tell you the truth about this kid's situation!" He glared at Lumian, daring him to object. "Foreigner, I can tell you still have your doubts about the authenticity of that story."
"Pierre, you'd do anything for a free glass of alcohol," Lumian retorted, scowling.
Before Ryan could even respond, Lumian added, "Why can't I tell my story and get an extra glass of La Fée Verte?"
"Because no one knows if they should believe you," Pierre smirked. "Your sister's favorite story to tell kids is 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf.' People who lie all the time lose their credibility eventually."
Lumian shrugged and watched as the bartender slid a glass of light green alcohol in front of him. "Ã‡a va," he said, unbothered.
Ryan turned to Lumian.
"Is that all right?"
"Sure thing, as long as your wallet can handle it," Lumian replied breezily.
"In that case, another glass of La Fée Verte," Ryan said with a nod.
Pierre's face lit up with a smile.
"Generous foreigner, you should steer clear of this one," he said, gesturing to Lumian. "He's the most mischievous bloke in the whole village."
"Five years ago, his sister Aurore brought him back to the village," Pierre continued. "He's been here ever since. Can you imagine? He was just a wee lad of thirteen at the time. How could he have made the trek to the hospital to become a corpse watchman? The nearest hospital is in DariÃ¨ge at the foot of the mountain. It would take an entire afternoon to get there by foot."
"Brought back to the village?" Leah inquired, her voice tinged with suspicion.
She tilted her head, causing her bells to tinkle.
Pierre nodded in confirmation.
"Aurore moved here six years ago. A year later, she went on a journey and brought this lad back with her. Said she found him on the road, a starving, homeless child. She planned to adopt him."
"Then, he took on Aurore's last name, Lee. Even his name, Lumian, was given by Aurore."
"I don't even remember what my name was before Aurore gave me the name," Lumian, unfazed by the revelation, flashed a grin and took a sip of absinthe.

It was clear that his past did not bother him in the slightest.

Chapter 2: "Prank"

Ryan apologized politely to Lumian. "Forgive me, I did not expect such a situation," he said.
Lumian chuckled.
"Are you suggesting we need another glass of La Fée Verte?"
Without waiting for Ryan's response, he changed the subject.
"What brings foreigners like you to Cordu? Are you here to buy wool or leather?"
Many of Cordu's residents made their living as shepherds.
Ryan breathed a silent sigh of relief and seized the opportunity to explain their true purpose.
"We came to visit the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's padre, Guillaume Bénet, but he seems to be absent from both his home and the cathedral."
Pierre, who had enjoyed Ryan's free absinthe, kindly reminded him that there was only one church in Cordu.
The other locals around the bar counter were all drinking, but no one answered Ryan's question. The name seemed to represent some kind of taboo or authority that couldn't be openly discussed.
Lumian took a sip of drink and thought for a few seconds before offering his assistance.
"I can roughly guess where the padre is. Do you need me to take you there?"
Leah didn't stand on ceremony. "If it's not too much trouble," she said.
Ryan nodded in agreement.
"Once you've finished your drink."
"Alright." Lumian raised his glass and finished the light-green alcohol.
He put down his glass and got to his feet.
"Let's go."
"Merci beaucoup," Ryan expressed his gratitude and gestured for Valentine and Leah to stand up.
Lumian's face lit up with a smile. "It's no problem at all. You heard my story and I enjoyed a complimentary drink. That makes us friends, n'est-ce pas?"
"Oui." Ryan nodded.
Lumian's grin widened, stretching from ear to ear. He opened his arms wide, beckoning the other party in for a hug.
"Ah, it is good to meet you, my cabbages," he exclaimed with fervor.
Ryan, who was about to be enveloped in a bear hug, froze.
"Cabbages?"
His expression was a mixture of perplexity and embarrassment.

Valentine and Leah mirrored his expression.
"It is a term of endearment we use for our friends," Lumian explained with innocent sincerity. "Everyone in the Dariège region is aware of it. It has been a tradition for centuries, believe me, my cabbages."
Leah couldn't help but glance around, producing the tinkling sounds.
Pierre and the others nodded in agreement, assuring the newcomers that Lumian's words were true. However, the grins on their faces hinted that they were pleased to see foreigners struggling to comprehend their affectionate greetings.
Lumian stroked his chin thoughtfully.
"Don't you fancy it?"
"Then I shall opt for a different option. It can also be used for friends.
"My dear bunnies, my darling chicks, my lovely ducks, or perhaps my adorable lambs? Which one tickles your fancy?"
But Ryan's expression was as stiff as a board, and Valentine's brow furrowed in confusion.
Leah let out a sigh, a mix of exasperation and amusement.
"Let's just stick with cabbage, shall we? At least it sounds normal."
Phew. Ryan let out a quiet sigh and gently grasped Valentine's elbow. He gave a slight nod and remarked, "They all seem like precious treasures in the family."
Without awaiting Lumian's response, he swiveled his body and addressed the bartender, "How much will it be?"
"Two verl d'or," replied the bartender, eyeing the glasses lined up on the counter.
Ryan settled the bill, and Leah shifted the conversation to a different subject.
"Lumian is an uncommon name."
"At least better than names like Pierre and Guillaume," Lumian countered with a grin. "If you were to call out Pierre in this place, a third of the people would turn their heads. Call out Guillaume, and another third will respond. As for this gentleman..."
He gestured to the skinny middle-aged man sipping his free drink.
"His full name is Pierre Guillaume."
Leah flashed a smile, skirting the topic of cabbage.
As they departed from the tavern, Lumian turned around and surveyed the surroundings.
"What's the matter?" Leah inquired with curiosity.
Lumian pondered for a moment and replied thoughtfully, "It's not just the three of you foreigners who came to the tavern today. Another person arrived earlier, but I don't know when they left."

"What did they look like?" Ryan asked with a serious expression.
Lumian took a moment to reflect.
"A lady. Very sophisticated. You can tell she's from the city with just one glance. I can't describe her appearance. Why don't I sketch her for you?"
"Do you know how to draw?" Leah queried, aware of Lumian's idiosyncrasies.
Lumian chortled.
"I don't."
"In that case, let's locate the padre first," Ryan decided, drawing the conversation to a close.
Cordu was a place devoid of street lamps at night, yet the twinkling stars above provided a faint glimmer that allowed the four of them to navigate the road. The yellowish light emanating from the windows on either side only added to the ethereal ambiance.
As they approached the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral situated in the village square, the grandiose structure appeared somewhat blurry in the darkness, as if it was merging with the night.
"We've been here before. There's no one here," Valentine grumbled with a frown.
Lumian smiled and said, "No one at the front door doesn't mean there's no one elsewhere."
He then proceeded to lead Ryan and the others around the front of the cathedral towards the cemetery, where they found a dark brown wooden door.
Lumian didn't wait for Ryan to knock. Instead, he reached over and fiddled with the keyhole before opening the side door with a creak.
"That's not very nice, is it?" Ryan frowned.
Leah nodded in agreement, her bells tinkling.
"We're here to visit the padre, not to fight him."
"Alright," Lumian acquiesced.
He closed the wooden door and knocked lightly.
"Hey, is anyone there? I'll come in if you don't answer," he muttered in a low voice that was barely audible in the night.
There was no response from inside the cathedral.
Without hesitation, Lumian pushed open the door and gestured inside.
"Go on in."
Ryan hesitated. He looked at the darkness behind the door and glanced at his companions.
"Okay." He took a step forward, slow but firm.
Leah and Valentine followed closely behind.
The four silvery bells adorning Leah's boots and veil were eerily

silent.
The environment was dim and eerie as the four of them made their way forward.
Out of nowhere, Ryan came to a halt and muttered in a low voice, "What's that noise?"
"Yes, I heard it too," Lumian agreed.
Without wasting any time, he forcefully pushed the door aside, and it opened with a loud clang, revealing what lay beyond.
The dimly lit space resembled a confessional. A beam of starlight shone through, revealing a naked man in his prime, lying atop a fair-skinned woman.
The scene stunned everyone, including the man and the woman.
Suddenly, the man sat up and bellowed at Ryan and his team, "Sacrebleu! You've ruined the holy church's plans!"
Amidst the reverberating roar, Lumian, who had quietly approached behind the group, waved his hand and spoke quickly, "Ah, it seems we have discovered our padre. Au revoir, my cabbages!"
Before anyone could react, Lumian dashed towards the side door, leaving his words to drift away in the wind.
As the team stood in shock, Leah, Ryan, and Valentine couldn't shake the words of the middle-aged man, Pierre Guillaume, from their minds: "...you should steer clear of this one. He's the most mischievous bloke in the whole village."
...
Lumian sauntered down the country road, hands tucked in his pockets while whistling a tune under the stars.
"As expected, the padre is having an affair with Madame Pualis."
"Mon dieu, these foreigners exude an air of prestige. The padre would never dream of crossing them. He must pay an exorbitant sum to keep his sordid dalliances under wraps and preserve his standing within the cathedral."
"Hmph, he only has himself to blame for lusting after Aurore. I have been biding my time for this chance..."
As Lumian muttered to himself, he returned to his abode on the outskirts of the hamlet.
The structure he called home was a peculiar semi-subterranean two-story affair. The ground floor doubled as both a kitchen and a lounge. A hefty oven and a grandiose stove dominated the room.
"Aurore! Aurore!" Lumian hollered as he trudged up the stairs.
No reply.
The upper storey was divided into three chambers and a lavatory, all the doors stood open.
Lumian peeped into each room but couldn't find his sister.

He mulled it over for a moment, then marched to the end of the corridor and clambered up the ladder that led to the roof.
The roof was a fiery orange, painted by the twilight sky. In the center sat a figure, holding their knees and staring contemplatively at the sparkling stars.
This was an exquisite woman, exceptionally so. Her long and thick locks were a shade of gold, her eyes a pale blue, and her facial features were intricate and refined.
Her gaze was fixated on the cosmos, her countenance serene, akin to that of a statue.
Lumian remained silent. He shifted to her side and sat next to her.
He lifted his head, gazing at the dense forest in the distance, absorbing the susurrus of the wind blowing through the trees.
After a while, the woman raised her arms and stretched, paying no heed to her appearance.
"Aurore, I don't understand why you come up here so often. What's so interesting about this view?" Lumian commented.
"Call me Grande Soeur!" Aurore scolded playfully, tapping Lumian's head with her finger.
Aurore sighed and thought to herself, "A philosopher once said that there are only two things worth revering in this world. One is the morality in one's heart, and the other is the cosmos above one's head."
Lumian noticed his sister's slightly melancholic expression and flashed a grin.
"I know the answer to this question. Emperor Roselle said so!"
"Pfft..." Aurore laughed.
She took a sniff and raised her beautiful golden eyebrows.
"You've been drinking again!"
"This is called socializing." Lumian took the opportunity to recount what had just happened. "I met three foreigners..."
Aurore could not help but laugh.
"I'm really afraid that the padre will have a heart attack."
Her expression then turned serious. "Lumian, don't provoke the padre anymore. It'll be troublesome if we get a new one."
"But I can't stand his face..." Lumian complained before Aurore stood up.
She looked down at her brother and smiled.
"Alright, it's bedtime, my inebriated brother," Aurore said with a smile as she threw out some silver dust.
Aurore flew down from the roof like a bird and entered the window on the second floor, leaving Lumian behind.
Lumian watched this quietly and shouted anxiously, "What about me?"

"Climb down yourself!" Aurore replied mercilessly.
Lumian pursed his lips, his smile fading bit by bit.
He watched the silver specks of light disappear in the night sky, sighed softly, and muttered to himself, "I wonder when I'll be able to possess such extraordinary powers..."

Chapter 3: Dream

Lumian lingered atop the roof, reluctant to descend just yet.

His visage was a picture of stoicism, betraying no emotion. Gone was the mischievous young man who frequented the tavern, always ready with a grin and a jest. In his place was a composed and resolute figure, unrecognizable to those who knew him before.

Since discovering Aurore's magical powers by chance, Lumian had been obsessed with obtaining them. But Aurore always warned him against it, citing the immense danger and agony that came with wielding such abilities. She refused to divulge the secret even if she knew how to grant them to mere mortals.

Lumian couldn't force her to reveal the method, so he resorted to pleading and persuading her at every turn.

After a few seconds of contemplation, Lumian sprang to his feet and made his way down to the edge of the roof. He climbed back to the second floor using the wooden ladder.

He strolled to Aurore's room, only to find the brown wooden door ajar before peeking inside.

Aurore sat at her desk, scribbling away with a champagne fountain pen, dressed in a sky-blue gown.

What is she writing so late into the night? Is it related to witchcraft?

Lumian placed his hand on the door and quipped, "Writing in your diary, are you?"

"Who writes in a diary, honestly?" Aurore replied without looking up from her writing.

Lumian wasn't satisfied with her answer.

"But didn't Emperor Roselle keep several volumes of diaries?"

Roselle, the last emperor of the Intis Republic where the siblings currently lived, had brought down the Sauron dynasty and assumed the mantle of Caesar, thereby declaring himself emperor.

The man had made countless strides in the fields of science and engineering, having been credited with inventing the steam engine. Not to mention, he had charted the sea route to the Southern Continent and sparked an age of colonization. He was the embodiment of his time, a symbol of a bygone era over a century ago.

However, in his twilight years, he was double-crossed and assassinated in the White Maple Palace of Trier.

In the aftermath of his death, his diary pages were disseminated throughout the world, yet they were written in a tongue that nobody could decipher, as if the words didn't exist in this world.

"That's why Roselle ain't no honest man," Aurore, her back turned to Lumian, scoffed.

"So, what're you scribbling there?" Lumian queried.
That was the crux of the matter.
Aurore responded with a shrug, her voice dripping with indifference, "A letter."
"To whom?" Lumian couldn't help but scowl.
Aurore paused, laying down her exquisite golden champagne fountain pen, intricately patterned, to review her words and phrases.
"A pen pal."
"A what now?" Lumian furrowed his brow, thoroughly perplexed.
What the hell was that?
Aurore chuckled, running her fingers through her lustrous golden hair as she began to enlighten her brother.
"That's why I keep telling you to read more and study more. Quit wasting your days drinking and carousing!
"Look at you. What sets you apart from an illiterate?
"Pen pals are friends who become acquainted through newspapers, magazines, and other publications. They've never met and rely solely on letters to keep in touch."
"What's the point of having such a friend?" Lumian asked, rather concerned about this matter.
As he withdrew his hand from the door, he scratched his chin, deep in thought.
Aurore had never had a boyfriend before, so he couldn't allow her to be fooled by someone she had never met before.
"Meaning?" Aurore thought about it seriously. "First off, emotional value. Oui, I know you don't understand the concept. Humans need to connect with one another, but some things and emotions cannot be shared with the villagers, nor with you. I require a more private outlet to release my thoughts. These pen pals, whom I have not met in person, are perfect for that. Secondly, do not underestimate my pen pals. Some of them hold great power, and some possess extensive knowledge. For example, a pen pal gifted me this battery-operated lamp. Kerosene lamps and candles are too damaging to the eyes and not ideal for writing at night..."
Without waiting for Lumian to ask another question, Aurore waved her hand behind her.
"Get some rest, my inebriated brother! Bonne nuit!"
"Alright, bonne nuit." Lumian replied, trying to hide his frustration.
Aurore instructed, "Don't forget to close the door. It's positively frigid in here with all the windows and the door open like this."
Lumian slowly shut the door made of brown wood, then headed to his room where he removed his shoes before sitting on the bed.
In the dimness of the night, Lumian could make out the wooden

table beside the window, the slanted chair, the small bookshelf against the wall, and the wardrobe on the other side.
He sat still, lost in thought.
He knew Aurore was a woman who kept her secrets to herself, and there were things she had not revealed to him. Lumian was not surprised, but he was worried that her secrets might put her in danger.
And when reality hit, his options were limited.
He was just an ordinary person, with a robust body and a sharp wit.
Thoughts came rushing in like waves crashing on the shore, and just as quickly they receded. Lumian took a deep breath and made his way to the washroom to freshen up.
Afterward, he removed his jacket-style brown coat and collapsed onto the cold bed.
The April air in the mountains was still nippy.
...
In the midst of his fugue state, Lumian perceived a murky mist, enveloping his surroundings and erasing everything in sight.
He trudged through the haze in a daze, yet regardless of which direction he took or how far he went, the fog always led him back to the same place--his bedroom.
The room was fashioned with a white four-piece bed, a wooden table and chair poised in front of the window, bookshelves, wardrobes, and the like.
...
Phew. Lumian's eyes flickered open with a start, the morning sun casting a light through the thin blue curtains.
He sat up, staring blankly at the room, feeling as if he was still trapped in a dream.
The same dream he had been having for days--the gray fog that refused to clear.
He raised a hand to his temples and muttered to himself in a deep voice, "It's getting more frequent. I have the same dream almost every day..."
Lumian's calm demeanor belied the fact that this dream hadn't brought about any negative effects, but it certainly had also failed to yield any positive outcomes.
"I pray that hidden in this is something propitious," Lumian murmured, as he rose from the bed.
Lumian opened the door to the corridor and was immediately met with a sound emanating from Aurore's room.
What a coincidence... Lumian smiled.
But then, a sudden thought hit him, causing him to take a step

back and stand at the edge of the door.
When Aurore's bedroom door creaked open, Lumian quickly raised his right hand and began to massage his temples with a slightly pained expression on his face.
"What's wrong?" Aurore noticed his discomfort.
Success! Lumian cheered inwardly as he tried his best to calm himself down.
"I had that dream again," he replied in a deep voice.
Aurore's golden locks of hair cascaded down her shoulders as she furrowed her brows with concern.
"The previous method didn't work..." she murmured to herself before suggesting,
"Perhaps... I should find you a hypnotist, a real Hypnotist, and see what caused it."
"The kind with magical powers?" Lumian questioned deliberately.
Aurore nodded lightly in response.
"One of your pen pals?" Lumian couldn't help but ask.
"Why do you care about this? Think about how to solve your own problem!" Aurore retorted without hesitation.
Isn't that what's on my mind? Lumian muttered inwardly.
He took the opportunity to say, "Aurore, if I become a Warlock and gain extraordinary powers, I should be able to unlock the secret of the dream and end it completely."
"Don't even think about it!" Aurore replied without hesitation.
Her expression softened as she continued, "Lumian, I won't lie to you. This path we're taking is dangerous, painful, and downright treacherous. If I had any other choice and if the world wasn't spiraling out of control, I'd be content with being a regular old writer and living a peaceful life."
Lumian didn't hesitate to interject, "Then let me shoulder the burden of danger and pain. I'll protect you, while you do what you love."
Those words had been repeating in his head for quite some time.
Aurore went quiet for a couple of seconds before a grin spread across her face.
"Are you discriminating against women?"
Before Lumian could say a word, she added with a serious tone, "It's too late to turn back now. Ain't no going back to what we had before.
"Fine, I get it. I'm gonna go wash up. You study hard at home today and get ready for the college entrance exams in June!"
"You said it yourself, the world is getting more dangerous. What's the point of taking exams?" Lumian muttered.
He believed that the key to success was strength, not some paper

degree.
Aurore just smiled and said, "Knowledge is power, my uneducated brother."
Lumian had no response, so he just watched Aurore walk into the washroom.
...
In the afternoon, in the bustling townsquare of Cordu,
Reimund Greg caught sight of Lumian Lee crouched under an elm tree. His thoughts were shrouded in mystery.
"Shouldn't you be holed up at home with your nose buried in those books?" Reimund approached him, his voice dripping with envy.
Reimund was Lumian's confidant, standing at a moderate 1.7 meters, with brown hair and brown eyes. He was an ordinary-looking fellow with a slightly flushed complexion.
Lumian looked up at him and offered a charming grin.
"Did Aurore not fill you in? Even the hangman deserves a respite! I've been cooped up for so long, I needed a break."
All morning, he had been ruminating on the possibility of acquiring extraordinary powers without Aurore's assistance.
This required him to seek out clues and take the initiative to investigate.
Eventually, he felt that the rumors of magical powers circulating throughout the village held some truth and leads, so he purposely waited for Reimund here.
"If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't rest for more than fifteen minutes," Reimund drawled, leaning casually against the elm tree. "We don't have a sister who's well-read enough to teach us. I plan on learning how to herd sheep next year."
Lumian paid no attention to Reimund's remarks and spoke reflectively.
"Recall the tale of the Warlock for me."
Reimund couldn't quite understand Lumian's intentions, furrowing his brow in confusion.
"The one about the Warlock?"
"In the past, there was a Warlock in our village, but he died later. On the day of his burial, an owl flew in from outside and perched atop his bed. It only departed after the coffin was carried out.
"Then, the coffin became unbearably heavy. It took nine bulls to pull it."
Lumian pressed further, "How long ago was this?"
Reimund's expression grew increasingly perplexed.
"How should I know? I heard it from my father."

Chapter 4: Shepherd

Lumian sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing with determination. "Then let's go to your father."

He had always been a man of action, and he knew that investigating the village legend couldn't wait. If he dallied, his sister Aurore would surely catch wind of it, and she would never allow him to proceed.

In Aurore's eyes, delving into the realm of extraordinary powers was tantamount to playing with fire.

How can I not know that there's danger? Aurore wouldn't lie to me about this. But even if the world is ablaze, I have to keep walking. I can't let Aurore face this alone... As he got up, this thought flashed across Lumian's mind.

Every time Aurore mentioned that the world was becoming more dangerous, the seriousness and worry on her face couldn't be any more genuine!

Reimund Greg looked at Lumian with confusion etched on his face. "Why are you looking for him?"

Lumian fixed him with a withering look. "Ask him how long ago the legend of the Warlock took place."

Why is this guy struggling to comprehend such a simple matter? Perhaps I need to find some time to test his intelligence.

Reimund still looked baffled as he gazed at Lumian.

"Why do you need to know such details?"

Uh... Should I bother trying to explain it to this clueless fellow? Or should I simply come up with a plausible excuse? He weighed his options.

Lumian's mind raced as he considered his next move. He knew that he couldn't keep his investigations a secret from his friends, but he also knew that pursuing the truth about the legend was a risky move. However, he quickly came up with an idea.

He flashed a grin that he usually reserved for moments when he was about to deceive someone.

"..." Reimund took two steps back, sensing that something was amiss. "Spill it!"

Lumian adjusted his dark-colored shirt and linen jacket before smiling.

"I believe the legend of the Warlock is worthy of our attention."

"What's so important about it?" Reimund asked after some thought.

"There was indeed a Warlock in our very village of Cordu in the past," Lumian said with a serious expression. "Think about it, my friend. When I lie, I don't provide specific details like the time,

place, and background that anyone could easily verify. However, this legend mentions a Warlock who lived in Cordu, and if it were a fabrication, it would be too easy for someone to expose it as such."
"But that was ages ago," Reimund countered.
"I'm also referring to the people who were around when the legend first started circulating," Lumian explained, his smile widening. "They could have easily confirmed whether or not a Warlock lived in Cordu at that time. And since the legend has been passed down through generations, it's highly likely that it's based on a real event."
Reimund remained unconvinced.
"But when you make up stories, you often use phrases like 'more than a hundred years ago,' 'centuries ago,' 'long, long ago,' to make it impossible for anyone to verify."
"That's precisely why I need to confirm it with your father," Lumian replied, a sly look in his eye that said: "You see where I'm going with this, don't you?"
"That's true..." Reimund nodded slowly, accepting Lumian's explanation, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.
As they left the square and delved deeper into the village, Reimund had a sudden epiphany.
"Mon Dieu, why do you want to confirm if such a legend is true?"
"Warlock, mon ami, that's what we're searching for! If we can confirm the house where he lived and the place where he was buried, we might uncover his secret and gain magical powers that go beyond mere mortals," Lumian replied, his truthful words dripping with deceit.
Reimund's expression turned skeptical: "Don't tell me lies."
"Mon ami, most of those tales are created to scare little children. How can they be true?
"And on top of that, anyone who seeks the power of a Warlock will end up in the Inquisition!"
The Intis Republic lay on the Northern Continent, where the orthodox deities were the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery. These two churches divided the faith of almost all the people, and they didn't allow the Church of Evernight Goddess, the Church of the Lord of Storms from the Loen Kingdom, the Church of Earth Mother from the Feynapotter Kingdom, the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom from Lenburg, and the Church of the God of Combat from the Feysac Empire to come in and preach.
The Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition was feared by all.

Countless heretics had been locked up and subjected to unimaginable torture.
Lumian laughed.
"Why are you fretting now, my friend? You said it yourself, most of those legends are false. The chances of finding a Warlock's remains are slim to none.
"Besides, even if we do stumble upon the remains of a Warlock, we don't have to take on his forbidden power. We can give it to the Church and get a handsome reward. Oh right, a Warlock's grave is sure to be overflowing with treasures."
The Church that Lumian spoke of was the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun. The Church of the God of Steam and Machinery wasn't found in Cordu, instead it was usually located in large cities and places with factories.
Seeing the temptation growing in Reimund's eyes, Lumian couldn't help but click his tongue in satisfaction.
"Do you really want to be a shepherd, my friend?"
The 'shepherd' he was not talking about the romanticized idea of a pastoral shepherd that city dwellers often had. No, this was a profession. Every morning, they would have to lead a flock of sheep out to graze and watch over them.
Cordu was located in Dariège, Riston Province. Being a shepherd was a profession here, a tough and lonely profession.
They worked for sheep owners, herding dozens, even hundreds of sheep back and forth between the mountains and plains.
This was known as a herding. Every autumn, the mountains around Cordu would wither, and the shepherds would lead the sheep out of the mountain pass to the warmer plains far away, sometimes crossing borders into Feynapotter, Lenburg, and other countries. By the beginning of May, they would have brought the sheep back to various villages to shear them and wean the lambs. In June, they would trek up the mountains and into the tall ranges. They'd live in shacks and make cheese while grazing the sheep until the weather turned cold.
The shepherds spent their entire lives on the move, traveling from place to place. They only had a small window to return to the village, which made starting a family nearly impossible. Most of them were single, and the few widows who had no choice but to herd sheep for a living were highly sought after by the shepherds.
Reimund fell silent.
After a long while, he hesitantly said, "I'll listen to ya. It does sound like fun, and I could use somethin' to pass the time."
In the ordinary course of events, once the family decided which child would become a shepherd, they would dispatch him to a

certain shepherd's location to assist between the ages of fifteen to eighteen. There, he would learn the ropes of shepherding. Three years later, the youngster would officially become a shepherd and seek employment elsewhere.
Seventeen-year-old Reimund, however, had found several reasons to postpone this matter for over two years. If his circumstances did not alter, he would have to start learning how to herd next year.
"Come on," Lumian said, patting Reimund's shoulder. "Is your father in the fields or at home?"
"Recently, there hasn't been much work. Lent is approaching swiftly. He's either at home or at the tavern." Reimund let out a voice of envy. "You don't know anything about this? You're definitely not a farmer. You have a fortunate sister!"
Lumian put his hands in his pockets and sauntered ahead, disregarding Reimund's lamentations.
As they approached the rundown tavern in the village, a person emerged from the side street.
This individual was dressed in a lengthy dark brown coat with a hood. A rope was tied around his waist, and he wore a pair of brand-new, supple black leather shoes.
"Pierre? Pierre of the Berrys?" Reimund cried out in surprise.
Lumian halted in his tracks and turned to look.
"That's me," Pierre Berry replied with a wide grin and a wave of his hand.
He was a scrawny man with sunken eyes and greasy, curly hair. His stubble suggested it had been quite some time since he last shaved.
"Why are you back?" Reimund asked in confusion.
Pierre Berry was a shepherd and it was only the beginning of April. He should be tending to his sheep in the fields beyond the mountain pass. *How in the world did he find himself in the village?*
He had only just begun his journey, and even if he had gone to Lenburg or the north of Feynapotter, it would take him a month to return to the Dariège mountains.
With his warm, smiling blue eyes, Pierre exclaimed joyfully, "Isn't it almost Lent? I haven't celebrated it for years. I can't miss it this year!"
"Don't you worry. I have a companion to help me look after the sheep. That's the beauty of being a shepherd. Without a supervisor, as long as I can find someone to help me, I can go wherever I please. I'm free as a bird."
Lent was a widely celebrated festival throughout Intis. People welcomed the arrival of spring in different ways and prayed for a fruitful harvest for the year.

Although it had nothing to do with the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun or the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, it had already turned into folklore and didn't involve the worship of pagan deities. Therefore, it had gained the tacit approval of the orthodox factions.
"You want to see who'll be chosen as the Spring Elf this year, don't you?" Lumian teased, flashing a grin.
In Cordu, the people selected a gorgeous girl to play the role of the Spring Elf for Lent. It was all part of the celebration.
Pierre laughed along.
"I hope it's your sister Aurore, but she definitely won't agree, and she's not the right age either."
"Alright," he said, pointing towards the tavern just a stone's throw away. "I'll head to the cathedral to pray. Drinks on me later."
Reimund absentmindedly replied, "No need. You don't have much dough."
"Haha, as the good Lord Himself has said, 'Even if there's only one coin de cuivre, we have to share it with our frères pauvres.'" He recited an adage that was well-known among the shepherds in the Dariège region.
Lumian beamed at Reimund, saying, "Pierre's loaded. He's definitely treating us to a drink!"
He pointed to Pierre Berry's spanking new leather shoes.
Pierre Berry was thrilled.
"My new boss is not too shabby. He gave me a few sheep and some wool, cheese, and leather."
The shepherds were compensated with food, a small sum of money, and communal animals, cheese, wool, and leather. The amount they received was dependent on the agreement they had signed with their employer.
For shepherds who had to travel long distances, having a good and suitable pair of leather shoes was the most pressing and practical desire.
As Lumian watched Pierre Berry strut towards the town square, his gaze gradually became solemn and filled with suspicion.
He silently muttered to himself, Going away for a week or two or maybe even a month just to attend Lent?
Lumian paused for a moment, his eyes scanning the area before he turned and strode towards the local watering hole with Reimund.
The tavern was a nondescript establishment with no fancy moniker to speak of. The townsfolk affectionately referred to it as Ol' Tavern.
Upon entering, Lumian's eyes darted around the room in their

habitual manner.
Suddenly, his gaze came to a halt.
There, before him, was the foreigner who had departed so hastily the night before.
She was alone, not in the company of Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.
Her dress was a long, flowing orange garment, and her locks were a rich brown, tousled in gentle curls. Her piercing, sky-blue eyes were fixed on the scarlet-hued drink that graced her delicate hand.
Beautiful and languid, she seemed out of place in the seedy, dimly lit tavern.

Kirsch. As expected of someone from a big city... Lumian's gaze eventually landed on the glass in the lady's hand.

The distilled spirit made from sugar and fermented cherries had a color and texture that appealed to the ladies. Of course, they could replace the cherries with other fruits, but it would alter the taste only slightly.

Cordu's Ol' Tavern had a limited stock of high-grade wine, including Kirsch, which Madame Pualis fell in love with during her visit to the provincial capital, Bigorre.

Madame Pualis was the wife of Béost, the local administrator and territorial judge. Her noble ancestors had lost their title during Emperor Roselle's reign.

Lumian knew that she was also one of the mistresses of the padre, Guillaume Bénet, but not many people in the village knew about it.

Lumian shifted his gaze away from the lady and walked towards the bar counter.

A man in his forties wearing a linen shirt and trousers of the same color was sitting there. His brown hair was no longer lush, and his face was creased from years of hard labor.

He was none other than Pierre Greg, Reimund's father.

Another Pierre.

At least a third of the people at the bar would answer to the call of Pierre, Lumian had joked earlier in front of Leah, Ryan, and the others.

In the village, when people talked about Pierre or Guillaume, they had to specify which family they were referring to.

Many families had fathers and children with the same names, making it impossible to tell them apart without adding "père," "aîné," or "junior" to their names.

Reimund sauntered up to his father's side and asked, "Papa, why don't you go to the square and chat with the others?"

The men in the village always convened under the ancient elm tree or in someone's abode, where they'd spend the day playing dice, cards, chess, and swapping all sorts of rumors—the tavern cost money, after all.

Pierre Greg, with a glass of rich red wine in hand, turned to his second son and said, "We'll go later. There shouldn't be many people at the square now."

That's right. *Where did all the men in the village go?* Lumian was immediately perplexed.

He had noticed the absence of the village men at the square.

"Monsieur, I want to ask you something," Lumian said bluntly.

Pierre Greg immediately turned alert.
"A new prank?"
The story of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" does indeed have a basis in reality... Lumian turned his head, gesturing for Reimund to speak.
Reimund hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts.
"Papa, how long ago did the Warlock legend you told me happen? The one where it took nine bulls to pull the coffin."
Pierre Greg gulped down a mouthful of wine, his brow furrowed in puzzlement.
"Why are you asking this?
"You know, your pépé told me this when I was just a wee lad," Reimund replied.
The Riston Province, where Cordu was located, and the neighboring provinces of Aulay and Suhit were located in the south of the Intis Republic. They were famous grape producers, and the wine here, especially the inferior ones, was very cheap. In some years, people could even drink wine like water.
Reimund was disappointed because it had been a long time since his grandfather had passed on.
Suddenly, Pierre Greg chimed in, "Your pépé claimed that he saw it with his own two eyes when he was but a young man. It spooked him so much that he became deathly afraid of owls. He was convinced that their evil talons could snatch his very soul away."
Lumian and Reimund's eyes sparked with excitement, almost in unison.
Merde, there were actual clues!
The legend of the Warlock—*it was something that someone had actually experienced?*
"Did Pépé mention anything about where the Warlock lived or where he was buried?" Reimund asked eagerly.
Pierre Greg shrugged. "Who cares?"
Not one to be deterred, Reimund persisted, determined to glean any shred of information. Before he could speak, Lumian intervened with a gentle touch on his shoulder as he spoke loudly, "The river awaits us."
Reimund was just about to take his leave with Lumian when Pierre Greg suddenly remembered something.
"Hold up, Reimund. You'll soon be a Greenwatcher, won't you? There's something you need to be aware of.
Greenwatchers had the crucial responsibility of patrolling the highland pastures around the village and nearby fields to prevent any illegal grazing during the prohibited period or livestock from ravaging the saplings.
Lumian didn't pay much heed to the conversation and made his

way to the tavern's washroom.
As he exited the restroom, he took a detour to the female foreigner who was sipping on Kirsch. It was impossible to discern her age.
Although he had no intentions of striking up a conversation, he observed her with great detail. It might come in handy in the future, just like how he had used Ryan, Leah, and Valentine to infiltrate the padre's scandalous scene.
After a few subtle glances, Lumian was poised to head for the entrance of the tavern to wait for Reimund when the languid lady in the orange dress looked up.
Before Lumian could retract his gaze, his eyes met hers.
Lumian felt a little awkward as his thick skin couldn't protect him from the unexpected encounter.
Many thoughts immediately surfaced in his mind.
Maybe I should take a cue from the padre and administrators of the Church and praise her beauty? Or perhaps I should switch gears and hit on her? Alternatively, should I show my inexperience and hastily turn around to leave?
As Lumian made up his mind, the lady interrupted his thoughts and said with a smile, "Been having dreams, have you?"
Lumian was hit by a bolt of lightning. His thoughts went numb and his mind froze.
After a moment or two, he managed to force a smile and asked, "Dreaming isn't unusual, is it?"
The woman touched her cheek with one hand and sized Lumian up. She chuckled and said, "Lost in a misty dream, perhaps?"
How could she know? Lumian's pupils dilated instantly, and his expression betrayed a hint of fear.
Despite having experienced many things, he was still young, and for a moment, he couldn't control his emotions.
Stay calm, Lumian. Stay calm... He repeated to himself, trying to relax the muscles on his face, before asking, "Did you hear the tale I told those three foreigners last night?"
The woman didn't reply. Instead, she pulled out a stack of cards from her orange purse, which sat on the chair next to her.
She cast her gaze at Lumian once again and broke into a radiant smile.
"Draw a card. Perhaps it can aid you in unlocking the hidden secrets of that dream."
Wh— Lumian was taken aback, his guard instantly raised.
He was both enticed and wary.
He looked down at the card she presented him and furrowed his brows.
"Tarot?"

The card resembled the tarot cards created by Emperor Roselle for divination.
The woman looked down sheepishly and offered a self-deprecating smile.
"My apologies, I must have grabbed the wrong one."
She swiftly returned the 22 tarot cards to her medium-sized handbag and pulled out a different deck.
"This is also tarot, but it's from the Minor Arcana. You don't have the privilege to draw from the Major Arcana pack, and I don't have the authority to let you..."
The Minor Arcana consisted of 56 cards divided into four suits, each representing chalices, wands, swords, and pentacles.
What is she talking about... Lumian was bewildered by her words.
This woman was stunningly beautiful and sophisticated, yet there was an air of eccentricity about her that suggested she was not entirely sane.
"Draw one," she urged, waving the Minor Arcana cards in her hand. "It's complimentary, so there's no cost to try. It may be the solution to your dream predicament."
Lumian chuckled.
"My sister once said that free things often come at the most hefty price."
"That may be true," the lady said after some thought.
She laid down the Minor Arcana card with a delicate touch, careful not to upset the glass of Kirsch that sat beside it.
"But as long as you don't pay, no matter what, how can I, a foreigner, expect to make you pay in Cordu?"
That's right… perhaps it's worth a try. It wasn't easy for me to get a hint about that dream. I gotta give it a shot, but what about the Warlock's curse? Maybe I should get Aurore's help? Lumian's mind raced with conflicting thoughts, and he couldn't decide what to do.
The woman didn't seem to mind his hesitation.
After what seemed like an eternity, Lumian finally made up his mind. Slowly, he leaned forward and reached out his right hand. Carefully, he shuffled through the stack of Minor Arcana cards and extracted one from the middle.
"Seven of Wands." The languid woman's eyes drifted towards the card.
The image depicted a man in verdant attire, standing atop a mountain with a determined expression on his face. In his hand, he held a wand, poised for battle against the six wands representing his enemies that were attacking from the foot of the mountain.
"What does this mean?" Lumian asked.

The woman's lips curled into a smile.
"I shall interpret it for you. It symbolizes crisis, challenge, confrontation, courage, et cetera.
"However, what really matters is that this card now belongs to you. When the time comes, you will discover its true meaning."
"You're giving it to me?" Lumian's confusion grew with each passing moment.
Could this card truly be cursed?
The woman ignored his query and started to put away the remaining cards. She picked up her glass and finished the remaining Kirsch in a single gulp.
With graceful strides, she made her way towards the staircase on the side of Ol' Tavern and ascended to the second floor.
It was obvious that she lived there.
Lumian felt the urge to follow her, but something held him back. His thoughts were in disarray.
Is this really an ordinary card?
She gave it to me. Does that mean she'll never be able to use that deck again?
Aurore might be able to shed some light on this...
At this moment, Reimund approached Lumian.
"What's the matter, my friend?"
"Nothing much. That foreigner was quite the looker, isn't she?" Lumian said patronizingly.
"I reckon your sister, Aurore, is far more beautiful." Reimund then lowered his voice. "Lumian, my pépé has been gone for ages. What should we do next?"
Lumian, who was in a hurry to leave, pondered for a moment before answering,
"Firstly, we could track down an elder around your pépé's age who's still kicking. Alternatively, we could head to the cathedral and examine the registry. Uh, but that's something to consider at a later time."
Lumian remembered his recent altercation with the padre and decided it was better to avoid the cathedral, unless it was absolutely necessary.
As the only cathedral in Cordu, it held significant power, even acting as a government entity. It recorded all significant events, including deaths, and marriages.
Before Reimund could ask any further, Lumian interjected, "Let's split up and see who fits the bill. We'll inquire tomorrow."
"Agreed." Reimund immediately agreed.
...
In the semi-subterranean two-story building, Aurore listened

intently to Lumian's tale, her piercing gaze fixed on the "Wand" card in his hand.
"It's an ordinary card, oui. I detect no malice or enchantments."
"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, what do you make of the foreigner's intentions? How did she know of my dream?" Lumian asked.
Aurore shook her head.
"Now that she has shown us her hand, we can only wait and see."
"I will keep a watchful eye on her for the next few days.
"Oh... And take this card. It may cause change. But have no fear, I will be watching."
"Alright." Lumian tried his best to relax.
...
In the dead of the night, Lumian deftly tucked the Wand card into the garments draping over the back of the chair, then slipped under the covers and shut his eyes.
Before long, a dense, ashen mist once again enveloped his vision.
Without warning, he jolted awake within his reverie.
He sensed his mind clearing, and a newfound lucidity taking hold.
Yet, the dreamworld swathed in that same murky haze lingered on.

Chapter 6: Ruins

Lumian's subconscious gaze darted around the room, taking in the familiar sights of the table, the chair, the bookshelf, the wardrobe, and the bed.

It was his bedroom, but it was cloaked in a thin, gray fog.

Is this some sort of lucid dream? I'm having a lucid dream? His pupils dilated as the realization dawned on him.

A lucid dream was a rare occurrence where one's mind could think and remember like in a state of wakefulness while still in a dream state. It was a skill that required specialized training to master.

Aurore had tried various methods to induce lucid dreams in order to unravel the secret of Lumian's gray fog dream and help him eliminate the latent danger it posed, but she had failed.

But now, Lumian found himself inexplicably conscious in his dream.

As the shock of the situation passed, he began to consider the possibility of why this had happened.

Could it be because of the tarot card that represents the Seven of Wands?

That woman said it would help me unlock the secret of the dream..

Therefore, its function is to allow me to enter a lucid dream state and explore the area enveloped by the gray fog?

Hmm... Compared to my previous impression, the gray fog seems to have faded a lot. A lot more...

With these thoughts racing through his mind, Lumian rose from his chair and strode to the side of the room. He placed his hands on the table against the wall and gazed out the window, where a completely unfamiliar landscape greeted his eyes.

This dream did not replicate the Cordu where he lived.

Under a thin, ghostly fog, a towering mountain peak caught Lumian's attention. It rose up twenty to thirty meters into the air, constructed from brownish-red stones and reddish-brown soil.

Buildings surrounded the mountain, now in ruins, either fallen or charred beyond recognition.

They resembled crypts, a disordered cemetery surrounding the mountain's base.

The ground was marred by holes and scattered with gravel. Not a blade of grass or a single weed could be found in this barren wasteland.

The fog in the sky thickened to an impenetrable white, with no indication of a sun. Lumian could only see as if in the dead of night, under the light of the stars.

After a moment of observation, he murmured to himself, "That's it? This is the dream that's been haunting me for years?"
But soon he refocused his thoughts on a more practical question:
Where is the dream secret hidden?
On the peak, or in one of these shattered buildings?
Lumian did not rush to leave his bedroom and explore the dream. Instead, he stayed put, scanning the area from his vantage point.
Suddenly, he caught sight of a figure darting through the ruins of the buildings surrounding the mountain peak.
Despite the fog's thinness and the two-story house's limited height, Lumian couldn't shake the sense of its presence. He wondered if he was hallucinating.
Taking a deep breath, Lumian muttered to himself, "Stay calm. Be patient. Stay calm. Be patient."
From what I can see, this dream is shrouded in secrecy, and it doesn't feel entirely my own. Lumian knew that blindly exploring it could lead to danger.
Yes, I will search for that woman tomorrow and see what information I can find. Then, I will make a decision...
Lost in thought, Lumian withdrew his gaze and prepared to exit the dream to rest in peace.
However, he didn't know how to wake himself up while being awake.
After numerous attempts to awaken, he laid in bed and attempted to clutter his thoughts, trying to recreate the state he was in while sleeping.
After an indeterminate amount of time, Lumian abruptly sat up and noticed the faint glimmer of golden sunlight filtering into the room through the curtains.
I'm finally awake...
As expected, sleeping within the dream restores my disoriented state. Then, I can escape...
Lumian breathed a sigh of relief and whispered to himself.
In that moment, a knock reverberated through the door.
"Aurore?" Lumian's heart clenched, fearing the worst.
"It is moi," Aurore's voice infiltrated the room.
Lumian sprung from the bed and rushed to the entrance. He grabbed the handle and pulled it open.
Lo and behold, it was Aurore standing outside. She donned a white silk nightgown, and her long tresses of golden hair cascaded elegantly down her back.
"How did it go?" She appeared certain that Lumian had just awoken.
Lumian held nothing back and recounted every detail that had

occurred.
Aurore nodded pensively.
"The purpose of the card was to facilitate a lucid dream..."
She inquired, "What are you going to do next?"
Lumian grunted curtly.
"I shall grab a bite to eat before visiting the woman and attempting to gather more information to discern her true intentions."
"Very well." Aurore offered no objection.
She added, "I shall also pen a letter to someone inquiring about the dream you recounted and the symbols therein."
At this juncture, she glimpsed Lumian's suddenly apprehensive expression and smiled.
"Fret not, I shall make adjustments. I shall not jettison everything at once. After all, I am the one who instilled in you the principle of gradual progress."
"Well, when you converse with that woman, do not be aggressive. Endeavor to be amicable. It is not that we are fearful of her, it is simply better to acquire another ally than an additional adversary."
"Understood," Lumian replied solemnly.
...
Cordu, Ol' Tavern.
Lumian strode into the Cordu, Ol' Tavern and approached the bar counter. He leaned in and spoke to Maurice Bénet, the tavern owner who also doubled up as a bartender.
"Which chamber does the foreign madame occupy upstairs?"
Ol' Tavern, the only inn in the village, boasted six rooms on the second floor for guests to rest their weary heads.
Maurice Bénet was not a burly man. Like most in the village, he had raven locks and blue eyes, but his nose was always red, a consequence of his heavy drinking.
He was related to the Church's padre Guillaume Bénet, but the two were not close and were merely distant cousins.
"Why the inquiry?" Maurice Bénet inquired, his curiosity piqued. "What business would a big-city woman have with a country bumpkin like you?"
There was an obvious look of inquiry on his face. Maurice had a sixth sense for these things, especially when it came to men and women.
Lumian scoffed, "Aren't you a country bumpkin and a hillbilly yourself?" He casually made up a reason, "The lady lost something last night. I found it this morning. Just trying to return her property."
Maurice Bénet didn't buy it for a second. "Is that so?"

Eight out of ten things that came out of Lumian's mouth were lies.
"What else? Do you think she'll fall for me?" Lumian said, undaunted.
"That's true." Maurice Bénet was convinced. "She's in the room by the square, opposite the washrooms."
After Lumian left, Maurice polished a glass, eyes tracking him. He whispered, just barely audible to Lumian, "Impossible? Not always. Sometimes people want to try something new..."
...
Lumian found the washroom on the second floor, the only spot of light in the dim, narrow hallway. But his eyes were drawn to the door across from it. A piece of paper hung from the brass handle, stark white against the dark red wood.
Scrawled on it in Intis: "Currently resting. Do not disturb."
Lumian read the note for a few seconds. Instead of rushing forward to knock on the door, he took two steps back and stood against the wall.
He planned to wait here until the lady came out.
Life on the streets had taught him hard lessons. When an opportunity appeared, you seized it with both hands, no hesitation, no second thoughts, no fear. Otherwise it slipped through your fingers, and you were right back where you started. So he would wait as long as it took, the minutes ticking by endlessly as he ignored the eyes he felt tracking him, the whispers in his mind.
He stood there without a hint of frustration, probably capable of passing off as a statue.
Finally, a soft creak.
The woman had changed into a pale green dress with white edges. Her brown hair was swept into a tight bun.
Those light-blue eyes flicked to Lumian before moving to the paper sign on the door handle, a smile dancing at the corner of her mouth.
"How long did you wait?" she asked, not at all surprised to see him there.
Lumian took a step forward and said, "That's not important."
He tried to keep his tone even, to appear less eager.
"What do you want to ask?" the woman said, cutting straight to the point.
Lumian glanced around the empty hallway. "Here?"
The lady replied with a smile, "If you don't mind, I don't mind either."
Lumian had already noticed that the other occupants of the tavern, including Ryan and Leah, were nowhere to be found. There was no one else on the second floor except for him and the woman in

front of him.
Lumian asked, organizing his thoughts carefully.
"What's the secret in that dream of mine?"
The lady laughed involuntarily.
"That's for you to answer, not me."
She paused for a moment before saying, "All I can say is, you'll find extraordinary power there."
Extraordinary power... His pulse roared in his ears.
"What's the point, if it's just a dream? Won't change anything out here."
The woman's lips curled into a smile.
"Who's to say what's possible, in the realm of the extraordinary? Perhaps, it can?"
After everything, the power I crave is there for the taking? Lumian's breath caught.
The grin slid away as the lady added seriously, "But danger lurks there too. Die in the dream, you die out here."
Die in the dream, die for real? Lumian didn't understand, but he chose to believe it.
That dream clung to Lumian like a shadow, as it had for years. But it was different, somehow. Special. And Aurore's voice whispered in his memory: "Careful's never a bad idea." Lumian preferred to view the situation as challenging and the consequences as severe. He couldn't afford to underestimate the danger or be careless.
After a few seconds, he asked, "If I stay out? What then?"
"Theoretically speaking, there won't be any consequences. No one will force you," the woman said thoughtfully. "But as time passes, I can't be sure that the situation won't change. And the probability of things going wrong is much higher than things going right."
"How much higher?" Lumian pressed. "90% to 10%?"
"No, 99.99% to 0.01%." The lady added seriously, "Of course, this is just my personal judgment. You can choose not to believe it."
Lumian felt a wave of uncertainty wash over him, his mind racing with conflicting thoughts.
Recently, I'm becoming convinced that the dream is a hidden danger. Not caring is the worst choice...
But if I really want to explore it, there's a very high chance that an accident will happen without any knowledge...
Should I wait for Aurore to gather more information from her pen pals before making an attempt?
But if I do, Aurore definitely won't allow me to use the dream exploration to obtain extraordinary powers...
Wasn't my investigation of the legend to seek extraordinary powers?

It's too risky. It can lead to death...
Perhaps I should do a preliminary exploration at the edge of the dream ruins to gather information and not take the risk of entering?
Hmm, I can tell Aurore about the conversation, but I can't reveal the possibility of obtaining extraordinary powers...
Once his thoughts had settled, Lumian gazed at the woman across from him and asked in a low, serious tone, "Who are you exactly? Why did you give me that tarot card and the opportunity to explore the dream?"
The woman smiled enigmatically.
"I will tell you once you have unraveled the mystery of the dream."

Chapter 7: Naroka

Once Lumian had departed from the Ol' Tavern, he found himself standing on the uneven road, uncertain of where to go next.

The morning sun beat down upon him, albeit with a slight chill in the air.

As he deliberated his next move, Reimund Greg emerged from the side.

"I was just looking for you."

Lumian quickly regained his composure and queried, "What's the issue?"

Reimund appeared taken aback.

"Have you forgotten? Today, we're supposed to seek out the elderly, around the same age as my pépé, and inquire about the legend of the Warlock."

Lumian groaned, pressing his hand against his forehead in agony.

"Is that so? Why can't I recall? Or is this just your imagination?"

Reimund's expression shifted from one of concern to one of fear. Just as he was about to inquire further and confirm whether he had imagined the events of the previous day, Lumian's face lit up with a mischievous grin.

"You rascal, you're playing a joke on me again!" Reimund cursed, unable to contain his annoyance.

"You need to work on your cursing," Lumian chided, shaking his head in disappointment. "Even Ava can curse better than you."

Ava Lizier, the beautiful daughter of Cordu Village's renowned shoemaker Guillaume Lizier, was now a goose herder.

Reimund's expression shifted as he muttered, "Ava..."

He then looked at Lumian. "She's our friend, right?"

Lumian nodded with a smile. "Indeed she is."

The trio, along with Guillaume of the Berrys and Ava's cousin Azéma Lizier, were inseparable teenagers who often spent their days together.

"Why don't we bring Ava on board to help us uncover the truth behind the legend?" Reimund suggested. "As you know, her father always said, 'Why must a dowry be paid when a woman gets married? How many good families have fallen like this?' It pains her to hear it. She might be relieved if she could get some treasure or reward from the investigation."

"I've also heard the heads of several families in the village say similar things, including our padre," Lumian added with a sly grin. "They wish their brothers would stay at home forever. Even if they get married, they won't venture out alone to establish a family. That would require them to split the assets and give them their

deserving share."
Lumian shot a furtive glance at Reimund and continued, "Therefore, many families prefer to let one of their children become a shepherd. This way, he won't get married and will have a certain income. Most of the time, he can support himself."
Reimund's expression gradually darkened as he considered the implications of this issue.
He had never thought too deeply about it before.
This was precisely why he enjoyed spending time with Lumian. Although most people in the village believed that Lumian had a poor character and enjoyed lying and playing tricks, he was actually more knowledgeable than anyone his age. Reimund, on the other hand, felt like he didn't know much and spent his days in a daze, simply following through with his family's arrangements.
It's good that you know... Lumian thought to himself before skillfully steering the conversation back to their investigation.
"It's too late now. We must hurry up and ask around. We will get Ava tomorrow. Yes, we can also bring Guillaume-junior and Azéma on board later. Not only will this potentially lead to gains, but it will also be a fascinating activity that can train our abilities."
"Bring Guillaume-junior and Azéma too?" Reimund grumbled begrudgingly.
The more people involved, the less his share of the rewards would be.
Furthermore, if he included them, he would have fewer chances to win over Ava's affections.
Lumian regarded him with a touch of kindness and pity in his gaze.
Silly child, do you think Ava will fall for you? Her eyebrows are very high, and she only wants to marry into a good family. She clearly has a certain favorable impression of me, a 'villain', yet she can control herself...
In the Dariège region, having "high eyebrows" meant having high standards, and they wouldn't settle for just any average bloke.
"My sister always said there is strength in numbers," Lumian explained simply. "Who are the old croakers that we need to visit?"
"You didn't investigate?" Reimund asked in surprise.
How could I have the energy to investigate after the incident with the Wand card? Lumian smiled and quipped, "Of course I investigated. I am just testing your ability to gather information."
Reimund had no doubts.
"There are nine elders who are still alive in the village. They are about the same age as my pépé, or a little older..."

Six women and three men. Ladies do live longer... Lumian listened quietly, deep in thought.
"There's no need to visit the last two. They're from another village and came here through marriage.
"Let's start with Naroka. She's the oldest and might have been an adult when the Warlock incident happened."
Naroka's real name wasn't actually Naroka. It was a title of respect for her.
In Riston Province, married women from prominent families or those who were the actual heads of households were entitled to the title "Madame". More than that, their names were marked with an "a" to proclaim their femininity, and prefixed with "Na" to signify their authority as Madames reigning over their domains.
Madame Pualis's family had been in decline for a long time, and at home she dutifully deferred to her husband Béost, the provincial administrator. Therefore, she didn't have a "Na" prefix or an "a" suffix. She could only be addressed as "Madame".
Naroka had been widowed early on in life, and as a result, she took over the family's accounts. Despite her two sons coming of age, getting married, and having children of their own, she kept her hand positioned squarely on the purse strings of the family fortunes.
This was a rare occurrence in Cordu, where men usually took charge of the family's affairs. In families where the father was absent, the eldest child would naturally take back the authority to manage the entire family from their mother once they reached adulthood.
"Okay," Reimund acquiesced without questioning Lumian's decision.
As they walked by a few buildings, Lumian spotted four old women basking in the sun as they chatted casually in front of a two-story house.
They sat very close to each other, catching lice on each other's bodies, which was a form of entertainment in the countryside of the Intis Republic that served to bring people closer and express affection.
"Do we ask her now?" Reimund hesitated, concerned that their pursuit of the truth behind the legend might spread throughout the village.
"Let's wait a little longer," Lumian replied solemnly, knowing that many rumors in the village were generated and spread through such gatherings.
After a while, the other three old women left one by one because they still had work to do at home.

"Good morning, Naroka." Lumian immediately walked over.
Naroka's hair was grizzled, and her eyes were slightly turbid. She wore a dark dress made of rough cloth, and her hands were covered in a layer of chicken skin with obvious patches on her face.
"When will Aurore join us? Many people in the village miss her," Naroka asked with a smile.
The men, I suppose? Lumian entered a state where he spoke his truth while the other talked about another matter and asked curiously, "Naroka, have you really seen a real Warlock? The one whose coffin nine bulls couldn't move?"
Naroka's visage shifted ever so slightly.
"Who told you that?"
"His pépé came back one night to tell him." Lumian began to spout nonsense.
Naroka was stunned. "Can souls really return..."
"My papa told me that Pépé had mentioned it when he was alive," Reimund interjected, unable to watch Lumian deceive the elderly woman.
Naroka's expression fell. After a moment of contemplation, she spoke up.
"Before he passed, none of us knew he was a Warlock. He acted perfectly normal."
Just like how you don't know that Aurore is a Warlock... Lumian thought to himself.
"Until he suddenly died and that owl flew over..." Naroka trailed off, lost in her memories.
The rest of her tale mirrored the legend.
Lumian pressed further.
"Where did that Warlock reside at that time?"
Naroka glanced at him.
"It's where you and Aurore are dwelling now.
"After that Warlock was laid to rest, the padre and a few others ransacked the place and burned it to the ground. For two or three decades, no one dared to approach that site. Eventually, the matter was forgotten. Later, Aurore came and purchased the land to rebuild the house."
Our place? Lumian's heart skipped a beat.
This answer was completely beyond his expectations!
In a flash, he realized that there were a multitude of problems he had previously overlooked.
With Aurore's knack for making money and her mysterious, unearthly abilities, why on earth would she settle down in the rural countryside of Cordu?

Cities like the provincial capital, Bigorre, the bustling textile center of Suhit, or even the capital itself, Trier, would be far better options. Even if Aurore was seeking a place with fresh air and a pristine environment, these urban centers boasted plenty of areas that would suit her needs.
Aurore once told him, "The best way to hide is to hide in a big city..." Lumian's mind raced as he struggled to calm himself.
Today, he learned that the land Aurore had chosen for their home, the land where their house stood, had once belonged to a powerful Warlock...
"Where is the Warlock buried?" Reimund interjected, unable to contain his curiosity.
With no hope of finding riches in Lumian's home, he could only hope that the Warlock's body held some sort of valuable secret.
Naroka said with amusement, "This was quite the affair. It undoubtedly sounded the alarm for the padre.
"In the old days, nine bulls were gathered to pull the coffin to the cemetery beside the cathedral. The padre performed a ritual to purify it. Eventually, the body was cremated and the remains were buried in a grave."
Reimund couldn't conceal his disappointment and muttered, "I see."
"Why do you inquire?" Naroka scrutinized Reimund's face before questioning.
Lumian cackled and spun a tale that sounded more like a fabrication. "We seek the Warlock's treasure."
"Kid, don't waste your time daydreaming," Naroka warned.
"Understood," Lumian replied meekly.
Lumian and Reimund bade Naroka farewell and hit the road toward the townsquare.
"There ain't no hope, Lumian. None at all," Reimund muttered, his spirits sinking as they circled a building.
"Indeed. All that could have been burned, has been burned. All that could have been taken, was taken decades ago," Lumian replied, nodding in agreement.
Despite the bleakness of their situation, Lumian wasn't disappointed thanks to the opportunity in his dream.
Reimund agreed.
"Aye, you're right. Of all the tales, only that blasted owl still remains."
Lumian's eyes lit up as he turned his gaze to the forest beyond the village. "Owl..." he murmured.
Reimund recoiled in horror and added hastily, "But it must have died years ago.

He wasn't one for consorting with the likes of owls and other evil creatures.
Down south in Intis, owls, nightingales, and ravens were thought to be sinister beings that served demons, stealing away human souls and bringing only misfortune.

Chapter 8: Owl

The idea hit Lumian like a bolt of lightning, but he didn't particularly fancy going through with it.

Ignoring the fact that years had flown by since the Warlock's demise and that the lifespan of owls was measly compared to humans, the sheer number of birds in the mountain was enough to make Lumian reconsider.

There were too many of the damn things!

That owl doesn't have any distinct markings... No, in the legends, there was no mention of anything specific about the owl. Naroka didn't disclose everything... We didn't inquire deeply enough... He snapped out of his thoughts and flashed a reassuring smile at Reimund.

"An owl tied to a Warlock could live for a hundred years."

As Reimund trembled with fear, he reassured him in a calm voice, "Don't fret, mon ami. This is my last resort. I do not wish to encounter a monster."

"Perhaps we should consult another old sage. Naroka may have overlooked a vital clue."

The man's tone turned seductive as he continued, "If I were a Warlock, I would not keep all my treasures with me or in my home. I would stash some away in case the Inquisition attacked me. I would not have the luxury of time to collect my belongings. When I must flee, I would be left destitute."

The Inquisition of the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun was notorious for hunting down Warlocks and Witches. Their "heroic deeds" were celebrated throughout the countryside.

Reimund's face lit up with excitement as he exclaimed, "You are right!"

He said with a yearning expression, "It's a shame. Too many years have elapsed. The Church's discovered riches must have been spent ages ago."

"Mon ami, that's a dangerous thought," Lumian teased.

Undeterred, they continued their visits to Pierre-père, Naferia, and other elders of the Maury family.

Although their responses mirrored Naroka's, Lumian and Reimund, with their newfound experience, managed to extract more details.

For instance, the owl was of medium size and resembled its kind. It had a pointed beak, a feline face, brown feathers with scattered spots, brownish-yellow eyes, and black pupils...

However, it was larger than the average owl, and its eyes appeared to spin. It was not as rigid or dim-witted as its kind.

All these peculiarities made the owl seem even more sinister in their descriptions.
"Seems like we've hit a dead end," Lumian stated to Reimund as they traveled to the townsquare. "We must focus on other legends."
Reimund was not as discouraged as he had been earlier. "Agreed. But which one should we pursue?"
This fellow is so proactive and hardworking... Lumian silently praised Reimund's enthusiasm and diligence and readied a reward for him.
He nodded and said, "Take your time and reflect on it. We shall discuss tomorrow. I shall impart combat techniques to you this afternoon."
"Marvelous!" Reimund exclaimed, overjoyed by the unforeseen instruction.
Aurore was a skilled fighter. After all, how else could she handle the savage and rough men in the village? Her younger brother was likely to be just as proficient.
After bidding farewell to Reimund Greg, Lumian veered onto the trail leading to his home.
As he walked, he spotted a group of men approaching him.
The leader was in his prime, not towering above 1.7 meters in height. He wore a white robe and had light black hair.
With a regal demeanor and decent facial features, the tip of his nose curled slightly in undisguised disgust and malice as he glared at Lumian with his blue eyes.
None other than the padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Cordu, Guillaume Bénet.
"I have been awaiting your arrival for quite some time," Guillaume Bénet bellowed in a baritone voice. "Did you deliberately bring those foreigners to the cathedral?"
Lumian attempted to explain himself as he furtively took a step back. "I thought you were sleeping inside."
He had noticed Pons Bénet—the padre's younger sibling—standing beside Guillaume Bénet. Pons was in his early thirties, muscular, domineering, and a bully.
The other individuals with them were the padre's henchmen.
Guillaume Bénet signaled Pons with a glance as Lumian retreated.
Pons Bénet's grin turned sinister as he lunged forward, bellowing, "Rascal, eet ees time zat you learn who ees ze father here!"
Before he could complete his sentence, Pons had already hastened his steps and pounced on Lumian. The other brutes followed suit.
In Cordu, a place where logic held no sway and apologies fell on deaf ears, brute force was the only language that could command respect. Guillaume Bénet, the padre, knew this all too well, having

resorted to violence countless times before. So, when he learned that the outsiders had been ushered into the cathedral by Lumian, the priest wasted no time in making his move. He was determined to get hold of the ruffian and pummel him into submission until he lay bedridden for a month. The padre was keen to show Lumian the error of his ways and wouldn't rest until someone paid the price for his insolence.
Of course, he had to avoid Aurore.
Regarding the law, he only needed to notify the administrator and the territory judge, Béost. The city sheriffs were unlikely to investigate such a minor issue in the countryside.
As an outsider, Béost would not offend a local-born padre unless there was significant conflict of interest.
Guillaume Bénet felt fortunate that the foreigners had not divulged his affair with Madame Pualis, the administrator's wife, to anyone. He was still unaware of this.
Despite their speed, Lumian was quicker. Just as Pons spoke, Lumian pivoted and dashed away.
He was familiar with the padre's character and methods.
Previously, a villager had accused Guillaume Bénet of having multiple mistresses and embezzling offerings from the Eternal Blazing Sun. He had also bullied others relentlessly in the village, hardly behaving like a man of the cloth. Subsequently, the villager had mysteriously died one afternoon.
Thud thud thud!
Lumian raced like the wind.
"Wait for your papa, eh? Attends ton père!" Pons shouted while chasing him. His pace was not sluggish either.
The thugs pursued closely behind him.
Instead of fleeing along the main road, Lumian darted into the nearest house.
The family was preparing lunch in the kitchen when they suddenly saw a stranger burst in.
With a swoosh, Lumian darted past them and leaped out of the kitchen window at the back.
By the time Pons and his cronies entered, the homeowner had regained his senses. He stood up to confront them and inquired, "What is going on? What are all of you doing?"
"Get out of ze way, old man!" Pons shoved the homeowner aside with force, but it slowed him down.
When they reached the window and jumped out, Lumian had already vanished into another trail.
After pursuing him for a while, they lost sight of Lumian entirely.
"Sacrebleu, ces chiens fous!" Pons spat on the roadside.

...
Outside the semi-subterranean two-story abode, Lumian gasped for breath before finally opening the door and entering the house as though nothing had happened.
"One, two, three, four; two, two, three, four..." A series of rhythmic shouts reverberated in his ears.
Lumian gazed at the empty space on the other side of the kitchen and observed Aurore's blond hair tied in a ponytail. She wore a flaxen shirt, tight white pants, and dark sheepskin boots, leaping around and drenched in sweat.
In Cordu, the kitchen occupied most of the space on the first floor, serving as the family's core. Cooking and dining occurred here, as did receiving guests.
She's exercising again... Lumian was accustomed to Aurore's eccentricities and was unfazed by her exercise regimen.
Aurore often did strange things without giving any reason when probed.
At the very least, exercising is beneficial, and it's quite a feast for the eyes... Lumian observed silently.
After a while, Aurore stopped and squatted to turn off the black tape recorder.
She took the white towel from Lumian and instructed him as she wiped the sweat from her forehead,
"Remember, we have combat practice this afternoon."
"I have to study and learn combat. Aren't you demanding too much of me?" Lumian grumbled nonchalantly.
Aurore glanced at him, smiling, and retorted, "You must remember that our objective is the comprehensive development of the five educations of morality, intellect, physique, aesthetics, and labor!"
The more she spoke, the happier she became, as if recollecting something beautiful or amusing.
I have already failed moral education... Lumian muttered under his breath.
He queried, "What kind of combat?"
One of the things he failed to comprehend was that Aurore, who seemed delicate and frail, was an expert in combat. She mastered numerous fighting techniques and could easily overpower him.
Aurore pondered seriously, leaned forward slightly, and gazed into Lumian's eyes.
She then laughed heartily and declared, "Self-defense!"
"Huh?" Lumian exclaimed in astonishment. "Isn't that supposed to be for girls?"
Aurore stood tall and shook her head gravely, saying sincerely, "Boys must protect themselves when they are out. Who says boys

don't encounter perverts?"
The smile on her lips was no longer hidden.
Lumian was unsure if his sister was joking or serious, so he remained silent as he retrieved the white towel and headed towards the stairs.
Suddenly, he felt something tighten under his foot, as if he had tripped over an obstacle. He stumbled forward.
In midair, Lumian hastily contracted his abs, extended his arm, and leaned on the chair beside him. He somersaulted and barely landed on his feet.
Aurore retracted her leg and chuckled.
"One of the fundamental combat principles is to be vigilant at all times. One cannot be complacent.
"Remember that, my novice brother?"
Her right hand had already clutched Lumian's back, but when she saw that he had regained control of his body, she let go.
"It's because I trust you too much..." Lumian grumbled.
He contemplated the matter and realized that this trust was meaningless. He had lost count of how many times he had been at the mercy of Aurore.
Aurore coughed and restrained her expression.
"How did it go with that woman?"
Lumian provided a brief summary of their conversation before declaring, "I intend to wait for your friends to respond before delving into the dream."
"Smart decision," Aurore affirmed.
Lumian changed the subject.
"What's for lunch?"
"We still have some leftover toast from this morning. I'll roast four more lamb chops for you," Aurore replied after contemplating for a moment.
"What about you?" Lumian inquired.
Aurore casually said, "I'll just have truffle bamboo chicken shreds topped with some cheese and onion soup. I tried it last time and found it to be quite..."
Before she could finish speaking, she suddenly froze.
The next moment, she raised her hands to cover her ears. The muscles on her face gradually contorted, making her appear somewhat ferocious.
Lumian observed silently, his eyes filled with anxiety and apprehension.
After a while, Aurore exhaled deeply and returned to her usual self. Her forehead was drenched in sweat once more.
"What happened?" Lumian asked.

Aurore smiled and responded, "The ringing in my ears is acting up again. You know that I have this old problem."
Lumian didn't probe further. Instead, he said, "Alright, then I'll prepare lunch. Rest well."
Every time this occurred, his yearning for extraordinary abilities grew stronger, as it became a pressing matter.
",

Chapter 9: Magazine

As the night settled in, Lumian finished dealing with his neighbors who had come to borrow the oven. He made his way up to the second floor, entering the room that served as Aurore's study.

In Cordu, many folks were destitute and couldn't afford their own ovens or large stoves. When they needed to toast bread or smoke meat, they had to borrow it from others and use it on the spot.

Aurore had always been lenient and accommodating when it came to this. Anyone could borrow her oven, but they had to pay the fuel costs or bring their own coal and wood.

Currently, she had donned her white silk nightdress and was curled up in a reclining chair, her focus solely on the book she held under the bright battery-powered lamp on the desk.

Lumian didn't wish to disturb her, so he nonchalantly pulled out a thinner book from the bookshelf and took a seat in the corner.

Hidden Veil... *What kind of magazine is this?* Lumian pondered, gazing at the cover that was adorned with cryptic symbols.

He swiftly flipped through the pages, and the more he read, the more he was taken aback.

This magazine delved into the very existence of the human soul. It discussed how all beings had a spirit, and through secret methods of communication between different spirits, one could obtain various kinds of aid.

Even if one wasn't devout, even if they only attended the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral to pray and partake in Mass occasionally, two words couldn't help but flash through Lumian's mind: Sacrilege! Taboo!

As a Warlock who would undoubtedly be burned at the stake by the Inquisition if her true identity was exposed, it was customary for Aurore to have such books at her residence. However, Lumian could tell that this magazine had received the government's permission for publication!

Can such a thing be openly published?

Didn't they say that publication censorship had always been very strict?

Or is this a fake permit... Lumian looked up at Aurore and inquired, "Is this a prohibited magazine?"

Aurore took her eyes off her book and glanced at her brother. She responded in a nonchalant tone, "In the past, it was underground fiction. Later on, for some reason, it cleared the censors and was officially published. The Eternal Blazing Sun Church actually didn't care and tacitly agreed."

"Fiction?" Lumian was taken aback by his sister's choice of words.

"Of course, it's fiction. You're not taking it seriously, are you?" Aurore laughed. "If what's written is true, do you think it can still be published? If you follow the method written on it, other than making yourself mentally weak and neurotic, there won't be any additional gains. Yes... there will occasionally be something real, but without the corresponding ritual language, it'll be a waste of effort no matter how hard you try."
This was the professional evaluation of a Warlock.
"Alright..." Lumian couldn't hide his disappointment. "I just find it strange that this can be published."
Aurore took a deep breath, her puffed-up cheeks accentuating her pondering.
"I don't know why either. Perhaps it's because the world has been seeing an influx of supernatural events lately, and it's becoming increasingly difficult to conceal them. The public is becoming more aware of their existence, and the government is slowly easing its grip on such topics. That's why books like these are being published. In Trier, Psychic, Lotus, and Arcane are the most popular magazines. I have them all on my bookshelf. If you want to come up with more realistic stories for the tavern, you should give them a read."
"Oui," Lumian responded eagerly, his interest piqued.
Simultaneously, he let out a wistful sigh deep in his heart.
Aurore's hoard of books was truly impressive and diverse!
Thanks to these tomes and Aurore's occasional elucidations, Lumian—a lad who had forsaken his schooling—had managed to acquire a reasonable comprehension of the world, continent, and nation he called home.
The world was divided into two great continents, one to the north and one to the south, separated by the treacherous Berserk Sea, where raging hurricanes battered any who dared to sail its waters. But the truly mysterious lands lay to the east and west, on the legendary Eastern and Western Continents. No one had ever set foot there, and some wondered if they even existed at all.
Lumian and Aurore lived in the Intis Republic, a land situated in the heart of the Northern Continent. It was a nation bordered by the Fog Sea to the west, the Feysac Empire to the north, and the Hornacis mountain range and the Loen Kingdom to the east. To the south lay the Feynapotter kingdom, Lenburg, and Masin.
The small countries nestled between the Feynapotter Kingdom and the Loen Kingdom, such as Segar, together with Lenburg and Masin, were collectively known as the countries of the south-central region. They shared a common faith in the God of Knowledge and Wisdom.

The Southern Continent had already fallen under the dominion of the various powers of the Northern Continent. Whether it was the Balam Empire, the Paz Kingdom, the Haagenti Kingdom, or any of the other nations, they had all but lost their autonomy. Yet still, a fierce resistance against colonization burned in the hearts of the conquered.

In addition to the Berserk Sea dividing the Northern and Southern Continents, there were other great seas: the Fog Sea to the west of the Intis Republic, the Sonia Sea to the east of the Loen Kingdom, the North Sea to the north of the Feysac Empire, and the Polar Sea to the south of the Southern Continent. They were collectively known as the Five Seas.

Of all the nations of the Northern Continent, the Loen Kingdom was the strongest, with the Intis Republic close behind. The Feysac Empire, defeated in the last war, had fallen to fourth place. The Feynapotter Kingdom had risen to third place. And among the countries of the south-central region, Lenburg reigned supreme.

Compared to the simple folk in Cordu who only knew of the Intis Republic, the Feynapotter kingdom, and Lenburg, Lumian was practically a cartographer.

It was no surprise really, considering the Cordu Village shepherds only traveled to their neighboring kingdoms of Feynapotter and Lenburg. They only had a limited understanding of these lands. The people in the northern villages of the Dariège region were just as provincial. Other than the surrounding settlements, they could only name Trier, Suhit, and a few other metropolitans.

Lumian was often baffled. *How did Aurore come by such vast knowledge?*

All the textbooks he read were penned by Aurore, and all his practice exams were prepared by her. Aurore had an answer for every question in the books he read!

But what stunned him even more was her expertise in various forms of combat.

It was simply mind-boggling that a woman in her twenties could accumulate so much wisdom. Some people couldn't amass that much knowledge even after living 50 or 60 years.

Could it be that these are the building blocks of a true Warlock?

Lumian looked up again and gazed at Aurore, lost in thought.

As Aurore patted her cheeks while reading, she hardly seemed like a scholar or a warlock.

Aurore caught Lumian's gaze and demanded, "What are you ogling at?"

Lumian quickly changed the subject, "Last time you mentioned that I possess the knowledge required to pass the college entrance

examination?"
Aurore pondered for a moment before responding, "In theory, you could gain admission to any university, but since I never took that particular exam, I can't say for certain what questions will be asked. Roselle sure did a number on the populace. Sigh, I guess it's a good thing..."
Undoubtedly, Emperor Roselle's reign spawned the college entrance examination, and it has remained a fixture of academic life to this day.
Aurore's mind suddenly shifted gears. She shot Lumian a sly grin and inquired, "Why did you not make your usual stop at the tavern today to regale the patrons with your tales?"
"I'm not truly an alcoholic," Lumian replied while flipping through his magazine. "Reading at home is equally enjoyable."
And it helps to calm my nerves and ease my mind... Lumian silently added.
Aurore nodded and glanced over at Lumian's spot in the corner of the room.
"Why are you sitting so far away, putting on an act of pitifulness, weakness, and helplessness?"
"Come closer. You need proper lighting to read at night, otherwise, your eyes will suffer."
Aurore sure has a way with words, Lumian mused. Although I understand the meaning behind "pitifulness," "weakness," and "helplessness," it's still an odd combination. Supposedly used to her idiosyncrasies by now, Lumian retrieved a chair and moved closer to the desk where Aurore sat.
The two of them spent the evening reading in silence, occasionally chatting, as the sound of their breathing mingled with the rustling of pages and the soft breeze that wafted in from outside the window. Peaceful and soothing.
...
As he bid Aurore goodnight, Lumian slipped back into his quarters.
He peeled off his coat and draped it across the back of the chair. He couldn't risk bringing the Wand card to bed with him; that would only raise suspicion, and his sister had sworn to keep a watchful eye on him at all times.
Just as he was about to approach the bed, Lumian froze, his heart skipping a beat.
His sharp eyes darted around the room, and he adjusted the chair that was usually positioned at a diagonal angle to face the window.
Then, he crawled into bed and extinguished the kerosene lamp resting on the cabinet next to him.

As he drifted off into the depths of slumber, Lumian was suddenly startled awake.
The bedroom was shrouded in a dense, gray fog.
Lumian, who was already mentally prepared, calmly took in his surroundings and made a realization.
The chair that he had meticulously arranged before retiring for the night was still positioned at an angle in his dream, just as it had been in reality in the past.
This suggested that the dream world he had entered was not an exact reflection of reality. *Perhaps it was a manifestation of his deepest subconscious desires.* Although Lumian couldn't decipher its meaning, he knew that it was something to be remembered.
He walked over to the window, placed his hands on the sill, and gazed out.
The mountain made of brownish-red stones and reddish-brown soil, and the collapsed buildings that surrounded it, were still present.
The eerie silence of the place was deafening.
Time quickly passed. After much contemplation, Lumian made a firm decision.
He would embark on a preliminary exploration of the area tonight!
His past life on the streets had turned him into a man of action.
He didn't rush downstairs, however. Instead, he opened the cabinet and began to pile on clothes.
He didn't need them to keep warm, but he wanted to increase his "defense ability" in this way.
He grabbed a cotton shirt, cotton pants, and a leather jacket, stretching his body to feel the fit. Any more clothing would only hinder his agility, and that was crucial in a situation like this.
As he adjusted to his current state, Lumian had a sudden thought.
This is my dream. Can't I get whatever I want?
With that intention, he muttered to himself, "I want a breastplate and a revolver... I want a breastplate and a revolver..."
The room was still shrouded in a thin, gray fog.
This won't do. This dream is special... His disappointment was palpable, but he quickly regained his composure and made his way to the bedroom door. Stepping out into the corridor, he found himself in complete darkness. It was murky and dim.
Lumian pushed open the door to Aurore's bedroom and then her study. The layout was slightly different from reality, but he recognized it immediately. The biggest difference, of course, was that Aurore was nowhere to be found. The entire scene was frozen in shades of gray.
The first floor was no different.

Lumian scanned his surroundings, searching for a weapon to defend himself. He knew his home better than anyone else and quickly found two viable options.
The first was a two-meter-long fork made of steel. Aurore had said that it was effective and outstanding as long as the target didn't have a long-range weapon.
The second was a sharp, iron-black hand axe.
Ah, why not both... Lumian couldn't help but think of Aurore's oft-repeated phrase, but he quickly dismissed the idea.
Today was all about reconnaissance. He needed to be sly, hidden in the shadows.
Lugging around a cumbersome weapon would only hinder his movements and give him away.
Taking a deep breath, Lumian stooped down to retrieve the axe.
He rose to his full height and set off towards the door, barely visible in the misty haze.
With a deft hand, he opened the door, not making a sound.

Chapter 10: Blood

As Lumian stepped out the door, he felt as thought he was transported to another world.

Before him lay no longer the familiar Cordu, but a dark-red mountain peak and the collapsed buildings surrounding it. Together, they formed a strange ruin.

The fog in the sky was thick and pale, making it difficult for light to enter. The ground was shattered and there were many rocks. Lumian gripped his axe tightly and inched forward carefully, his heart pounding in his chest. Along the way, he couldn't find a place to hide.

There were no weeds or trees.

Lumian walked in fear, his every sense on high alert. All he could do was hunch his back and comfort himself. At the very least, if there was any danger in this area, it would be obvious at a glance. He could discover it in advance.

Finally, he arrived at the ruins, a half-collapsed building that had been wrecked by fire.

Lumian surveyed the area for a moment and tentatively confirmed that there were no other creatures lurking about. Satisfied with his assessment, he cautiously made his way inside the building, being mindful of the charred wood that could fall at any moment from midair.

As he searched the room, his eyes landed on a broken pot in the corner of the house. There was a hint of gold shining through the cracks.

Lumian approached the pot slowly and realized that it was a gold coin.

Can it be true? There's actually treasure in the ruins of my dream?

He picked up the gold coin and wiped it against his body.

The patterns on the surface of the coin were revealed.

The coin featured a man's portrait carved on the front. His face was thin, and his hair was parted 30-70. There was a mustache on his lips, and his gaze was rather firm. On the back was a bunch of sweet iris flowers surrounding the number 20.

Lumian recognized the man depicted on the coin. It was none other than the first president of the Intis Republic, Levanx.

It's actually a Louis d'or... Lumian was rather surprised.

Firstly, he couldn't believe that the currency in this strange dream ruin was actually the currency of the Intis Republic in reality. And secondly, he had casually picked up something as valuable as a Louis d'or.

He knew that in the present day, the legal currencies of the Intis

Republic were verl d'or and coppet. One verl d'or was equivalent to 100 coppet.
Coppet existed in the form of copper coins and silver coins. The copper coins were divided into three categories: 1 coppet, 5 coppet, 10 coppet, while the silver coins had the denominations of 20 coppet and 50 coppet.
Verl d'or could be found in the form of silver coins, gold coins, or banknotes. In silver coins, there were denominations of 1, 5, and 10 verl d'or, while gold coins came in 5, 10, 20, 40, and 50 denominations.
The denominations of banknotes were even more varied, ranging from 5, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, 1,000 verl d'or.
In reality, the people of Intis still clung to the old currency units. For example, the most widely used 5 coppet copper coins were known as 'lick.'
Similarly, gold coins worth 20 verl were commonly referred to as Louis d'or.
In the old currency era, Louis d'or had been known as Roselle. But after the Republic was established, the name was changed to Louis d'or in order to erase Emperor Roselle's influence.
As Lumian understood it, even in the rural area of Cordu, a Louis d'or could sustain a poor family with fields for an entire month.
He knew that without Aurore's high income, he might never have even seen what a Louis d'or looked like. In fact, in the entire village of Cordu, only the siblings and the family of the administrator had ever seen or owned a Louis d'or.
To any villager, this Louis d'or was an incredibly valuable gain.
Unfortunately, this is just a dream... Lumian couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment.
This was something ordinary, making it unlikely he could "bring" it out of the dream.
But even so, he handled the Louis d'or with great care and respect. Having spent much of his life wandering, he knew the value of every coppet.
And he knew that one Louis d'or was equivalent to 2,000 coppet, which was equal to one gold pound in the Loen Kingdom, though slightly less. According to the papers he had read, 24 verl d'or could only be exchanged for one gold pound.
Lumian continued his search for any written information that could shed light on the ruins and their history. He wanted to see if this place corresponded to a certain location in reality, and whether a village in the Intis Republic had been "transported" into this dream world. The appearance of the Louis d'or had only fueled his curiosity.

As Lumian moved cautiously through the ruined building, his eyes fell upon a spot where a stove had once stood, now stained with a dark red color.
"Blood?" His pupils dilated as he quickly made a guess.
Immediately after, he made a judgment.
Although it wasn't fresh, it hadn't yet turned black—it looked as though it had just dripped there two or three days prior, or perhaps even more recently!
As his heart began to race, Lumian suddenly felt the light around him dim, as if something had silently blocked the light filtering through the dense fog from above!
The memory of past attacks flooded Lumian's mind like a turbulent wave, causing him to react instinctively.
Without a thought, he lunged forward and wrapped his body in midair, rolling on the ground to avoid any potential danger.
Thump!
A loud thump echoed through the air as something heavy fell behind him.
Lumian quickly rolled to the left side of the dilapidated stove, using a nearby rock to leverage himself around.
As he rose to his feet, axe at the ready, he saw an additional figure standing where he had just been moments before.
The dim light made it difficult to discern whether it was human or some kind of humanoid creature.
The figure hunched in front of Lumian was unlike anything he had ever seen before. It was a monster, with no clothes or shoes to speak of. Its skin had been peeled off, revealing the red muscles, blood vessels, and yellowed fascia beneath. Sticky liquid dripped from its body, yet it didn't fall to the ground.
It was a monster!
Its eyes seemed to be embedded in its face, and its mouth hung open with all its might, revealing uneven teeth and a long drool of saliva.
Despite all the ghost stories Lumian had fabricated in the past, he never expected to encounter such an evil spirit in real life.
Whoosh!
The stench of blood filled Lumian's nostrils as the panting of the monster filled his ears.
Instinct took over Lumian as he dodged to the side, narrowly avoiding the blood-red monster's attack.
Lumian knew that he had Aurore's guidance and years of experience fighting on the streets to thank for his quick reflexes. Without them, he might not have been able to react in time.
Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Lumian charged after the

monster that had pounced on him. With his sharp axe in hand, he swung with all his might and struck the monster in the back.
Bang!
Lumian's axe felled the monster mid-turn, sending a spray of pus and blood in every direction.
Without a moment's hesitation, Lumian knelt down on one knee and raised his axe again, ready to strike another blow.
Bang! Bang! Bang!
Again and again, Lumian swung his axe with precision and force, each strike slicing through the monster's flesh and leaving deep, wide cracks on the back of its head, neck, and back.
Finally, the monster lay still, defeated by Lumian's fierce barrage of blows.
"Huff! Puff! You don't act as terrifyingly as you look." Lumian heaved a sigh of relief, his voice tinged with a hint of mockery.
He wiped his face with his left hand, then used it to wipe off the blood on his other hand.
"Is this monster's bodily fluids poisonous? For the time being, there's no pain of the fluids eating at me..." Lumian began to worry about another problem.
Just as Lumian mustered up his courage and was about to search the monster's body, he was caught off guard by a sudden movement. The skinless, blood-colored monster propped itself up with both hands and bounced up again, as if it were still alive.
It isn't dead yet?
Despite being slashed to such a state, it seemed that the monster was still alive.
Lumian was shocked and afraid.
Fear and trepidation took hold of Lumian.
If Lumian had been facing normal humans, beasts, or monsters, he would not have been so afraid, even if he couldn't defeat them. But this monster in front of him seemed unkillable, rendering Lumian's every move useless.
Taking advantage of the monster's brief disorientation, Lumian made a quick decision. He propped himself up with his feet, exerted strength on his knees, and ran wildly.
Thud! Thud! Thud!
He ran with all his might, but he could feel the monster's breath on the back of his neck, and the sound of its heavy breathing echoed in his ears.
The monster followed closely behind him.
Despite his fear, Lumian gritted his teeth and allowed his fear to push himself
to run even faster, surpassing his previous limits.

To his delight, he soon realized that the distance between him and the monster was no longer shortening.
Thud! Thud! Thud!
Lumian finally reached his semi-subterranean two-story building as he pulled open the unlocked door and jumped inside.
With a loud clang, he slammed the door shut and quickly made his way to the stove, where he picked up a steel fork that was leaning against the wall.
Then he focused on the door.
But then, he heard the sound of the monster's running footsteps fading away. He waited, but the monster didn't try to slam through the door.
It knows that I'm lying in ambush here? Lumian couldn't believe that the monster had higher intelligence.
He slowly moved towards the window near the door and peeked out.
Suddenly, a face appeared on the glass—a bloody, skinless mess with uneven teeth.
Lumian froze for a moment, his heart almost stopping.
To Lumian's surprise, the monster didn't try to break the glass or attack him. Instead, it simply met his gaze.
Lumian snapped out of his daze and retreated, brandishing the long fork with both hands.
The monster left the window.
Lumian watched cautiously, observing its movements as it lingered in the light fog for a while before finally retreating back to the ruins.
Lumian was at a loss.
He had been prepared to trap the monster and make a quick escape from the dream, but the creature had simply left without attacking.
After some thought, a possibility occurred to Lumian. *Perhaps the monster is afraid to enter my house?*
Yes, there's no signs of damage to the house at all...
In the dream, this is an absolutely safe place?
With this realization, Lumian felt a sense of relief wash over him.
Lumian was hit with a wave of exhaustion the next second.
The short chase had taken more out of him than an entire afternoon of combat training.
Lumian made his way upstairs to his bedroom, clutching the pitchfork and axe tightly in his hands. As he lay down on the bed, Lumian attempted to fall asleep.
...
Lumian opened his eyes, feeling disoriented and groggy.

Outside the curtains, it was still dark, and the room was shrouded in shadows.

For a moment, Lumian couldn't tell if he was still in the dream world or if he had somehow returned to reality. But then he noticed the lack of gray fog and the fact that he was wearing his pajamas, and he realized that he must have woken up.

"I woke up early because of the fright," Lumian muttered to himself, subconsciously patting the pocket of his pajamas. But when he didn't feel the weight of the Louis d'or, he felt a pang of disappointment.

It confirmed another fact—that money couldn't be brought out of the dream world!

Lumian took a deep breath and composed himself, his thoughts turning to a serious problem:

How was he supposed to deal with that unkillable monster?

While Lumian knew that he could bypass the area and enter stealthily, he also knew that this was not a long-term solution. The possibility of encountering similar monsters in the future was always there, and he couldn't afford to risk his life by being unprepared.

Chapter 11: Madame Pualis

The azure sky was speckled with fluffy white clouds, gently blown by the spring breeze that carried with it the fragrance of the forest. White geese pecked at the lush grasses, grazing beside the meandering river. A lass, draped in a grayish-white frock, stood intently observing them with a long pole in her hand.

Her countenance was bathed in the golden sun rays, exposing her thin, downy hair. The girl's brown tresses, elegantly tied in a white cloth, revealed her youthful and lively features.

Glancing at Lumian sitting under a tree by the river, Ava Lizier scrunched her face slightly.

"Are we not here to discuss which legend is easier to investigate? Why have you turned into a stone statue reminiscent of the ones from the cathedral?"

Ava was the daughter of Guillaume Lizier, the shoemaker. Being one of the few youths in the village, she had an amiable relationship with Lumian and Reimund.

"I'm contemplating a problem," Lumian responded, still gazing at the white geese and the rippling waters.

"What problem?" inquired Reimund Greg, who was tending to Ava's flock of geese.

Lumian pondered before replying, "What if you come across a beast with a thick hide that your weapon cannot pierce, what would you do?"

"Obviously, I'd find a way to flee. The mountains are teeming with wild beasts. We need not hunt it," Ava replied, feeling that there was nothing to worry about.

Lumian grunted in disagreement.

"What if that beast is exceptionally rare, and the lords in the city adore it, and are willing to pay a hundred Louis d'or for its carcass?"

"A hundred Louis d'or, two thousand verl d'or..." Reimund breathed heavily.

He had never seen a Louis d'or before, nor had he used one. His instinct was to convert it into verl d'or first.

With such a hefty sum of money, he could start a small business in Darième. He wouldn't have to fret over shepherding anymore.

He quickly thought and suggested, "Borrow a shotgun?"

"The beast's skin cannot be penetrated," Lumian rejected flatly.

Even though she knew the prey was just a figment of imagination, with no value in the real world, she couldn't help herself.

"Is it a powerful creature? Fierce?"

Lumian paused to consider her question.

"It's about as fierce as me."
That was all the assurance he needed to continue his hunt.
Reimund, who had been holding his breath, let out a sigh of relief. "Good. Go back to the village and round up some people. We'll surround the beast and drain its strength. Once it's down, we'll tie it up."
He knew that Lumian could fight, but that was all.
"In that case, we can only expect to get ten Louis d'or, or even less," Lumian reminded.
Ava, with her stunning lake-blue eyes, had an idea. "I've seen them hunt before. Maybe we can dig a trap and make it fall. That way, we won't have to worry about it getting back up."
Lumian nodded his approval. "That's a good idea."
Realizing that Ava and Reimund had little to offer in terms of planning, Lumian took control of the conversation.
"Which legend do you think we should target next?" he asked.
Ava shook her head. "Neither of them fit the bill. They're either centuries old or were only seen by one person, who is long dead."
Reimund agreed. "That's right."
"If you don't ask the right folks, how would you know there ain't no clues?" Lumian clicked his tongue and chuckled. "You lot don't have any grit. If you wanna give up at the first sign of trouble, you might as well be tending geese and sheep for the rest of your days."
Ava and Reimund were fuming at Lumian's words.
When it came to riling people up, Lumian was one of the best in all of Cordu.
Ava blurted out, "I don't think any of them are suitable 'cause there are more suitable ones."
"What is it?" Lumian's eyes sparked with interest.
As soon as Ava spoke, she regretted it, but she'd been planning to bring up this issue. She just didn't want to reveal it to Lumian and Reimund so easily.
After a few seconds of tense silence, she glared at Lumian.
"There's a real witch in the village."
"Who is it?" Lumian's heart tightened.
Could it be Aurore?
If Ava found out that Aurore was a Warlock, he and Aurore would have to flee Cordu and go somewhere else to avoid the Inquisition's wrath.
Ava looked around nervously and lowered her voice. "Madame Pualis."
Madame Pualis, the administrator's wife and the padre's mistress? Lumian found it hard to believe.
"Are you serious?"

If Pualis was indeed a witch, how could Lumian have missed it when he found out about the lady's affair with the padre?
"No way?" Reimund was exceptionally surprised.
Ava tiptoed and looked in the direction of the village entrance.
"I'm not certain, but Charlie, the administrator's valet, let it slip once.
"He told me that Madame Pualis is a soul messenger who can talk to the dead and help them return home. He also said that she can create secret medicines and charms."
Lumian listened intently but remained skeptical.
With magazines like Psychic, Lotus, and Hidden Veil flooding the market, it wasn't uncommon for the administrator's wife to be familiar with such terms and trick the servants and villagers.
"We should go to the cathedral and snitch," said Reimund, his eyes wide with excitement.
Lumian paused before responding, "If Charlie knows that Madame Pualis is a witch, then the administrator should know as well, right?"
"Oui," agreed Ava.
Lumian continued, "Madame Pualis is also the padre's mistress. If we go to the cathedral and snitch on her, we will probably be sent straight to the administrator."
"What?"
"Madame Pualis is the padre's mistress?"
Ava and Reimund were shocked.
"I saw it with my own eyes." Lumian chuckled. "Pretend you don't know. Don't tell anyone. Otherwise, you might disappear one day."
Ava and Reimund agreed in unison, their expressions unusually solemn, their fear of the padre and the witch intertwined.
"If we can confirm that Madame Pualis is a witch, we'll go to Darième and tell the bishop at Mass," Lumian assured them.
"Oui," Reimund nodded fervently.
They had to be sure before they snitched. Otherwise, they would be in trouble if Madame Pualis was innocent.
After discussing these matters, Lumian, who didn't want to waste any time, stood up and said to Ava and Reimund, "I'm off, back to my studies. Otherwise, Aurore would be chasing me with a wooden stick. You two take care of the geese."
"Okay." Reimund was thrilled at the prospect of being left alone with Ava.
Ava looked displeased.
.....
As Lumian approached Cordu, he began to hide his tracks, constantly paying attention to whether there was anyone nearby.

He had to be careful, especially now that the Padre and his crew were on his tail.
According to his observations, the padre, Guillaume Bénet, was not one to forgive easily.
He made his way towards Ol' Tavern, trying to stay as inconspicuous as possible.
Suddenly, he heard the sound of bells ringing in the distance.
Lumian turned to see Ryan, Leah, and Valentine approaching Naroka and the others.
The bells on Leah's veil and boots rang clearly and melodiously.
They've been wandering around the village for the past two days, chatting with people and asking questions. I don't know what they are up to... Lumian was puzzled and a little wary.
As he thought about the deserted town square and the shepherd, Pierre Berry, who had returned to the village unexpectedly, Lumian knew that something was about to go down.
Is something about to happen in the village? He needed to speak to Aurore, his smart and knowledgeable sister, and get her opinion.
Lumian managed to sneak into Ol' Tavern and spotted the woman who had given him the tarot card sitting in her usual spot, eating.
Lumian leaned over and took a glance.
"Omelette au lard? Don't you find it a little too cloying?"
In Dariège, this dish was the go-to for ordinary folks to impress their fancy guests. Lumian, however, had his doubts about it being too greasy and heavy for city women.
The lady savored a slow bite of the golden omelet and shut her eyes to savor it.
"It's a real gem. It's got this local flavor that's just exquisite."
"You're having lunch so early?" Lumian asked, seated across from her.
The lady's light-blue eyes betrayed a hint of exhaustion as she smiled and replied, "It's breakfast."
What time is it... Lumian didn't dare let slip his thoughts.
He scanned the nearly empty Ol' Tavern and hushed his voice.
"I saw a ruin in my dream and came across a monster."
"Oh." The lady didn't bat an eye. Her expression even held a hint of teasing mischief that Lumian couldn't quite decipher.
Lumian composed himself and recounted his tale.
"How do I vanquish this monster?"
The lady beamed and countered, "Is it dead or alive?"
"It's still kicking. I can't seem to kill it..." Lumian trailed off then answered on reflex.
He pondered in earnest for a beat before replying slowly, "I can feel it breathing. So, it's gotta be alive."

"If it's still breathing, then try harder. Lop off its head. Or pour oil and light it up. Bury it alive, even. Who knows? It might just kick the bucket," the lady suggested nonchalantly while relishing her meal. "When you've exhausted all options and still come up short, then come to me. But I'm not your nanny who'll coddle you through every little problem. If you want to learn, you've got to figure it out on your own."

She's quite the charmer... Lumian wasn't crestfallen or dispirited. It seemed the lady was hinting that she'd lend a hand if things got truly dire. And a monster like this wasn't even worth mentioning.

But what's trivial can be a real headache... Lumian felt a migraine coming on.

He resolved to heed the lady's advice. He'd start by trying to behead it, burn it, bury it alive, and anything else he could think of.

Chapter 12: Undercurrents

As Lumian left Ol' Tavern, he resumed his surreptitious ways, skulking down the path he always took home.

Sure enough, he spotted one of Pons Bénet's goons hiding behind a tree, spying on passersby.

The padre doesn't know when to quit... Lumian muttered to himself.

But Lumian couldn't retaliate.

His personal abilities were limited, and he couldn't risk bringing attention from the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun in the Dariège region. The Inquisition would be all over him in a heartbeat, which could spell doom for Aurore.

Unless Lumian was pushed to the brink and had no other choice but to abandon the town, his only option was to expose the padre's unsavory activities and force him to retire to a cloister.

But that was easier said than done. Lumian needed to be careful and cunning, just like when he let the foreigners discover the padre's affair with Madame Pualis.

Lumian didn't want to make a big fuss about it. He knew that Béost, the administrator and territorial judge, was a stickler for his reputation. If Lumian brought Madame Pualis's predicament to light, he wouldn't get any favors in return. No, it would be more likely that Béost would turn on him, filled with bile and vitriol.

That would leave Lumian with little choice but to flee Cordu, with both the padre and administrator hot on his heels.

He proceeded with caution, taking a detour through a narrow alley that weaved between several houses.

Along the way, Lumian relied on his wits and the surroundings to conceal himself. He ducked behind walls, slipped through doors, and took refuge behind trees whenever necessary. As he neared the end of the alley, he heard the sound of voices.

"Guillaume, why we waste our time chasing zat keed all day? Let's go to Aurore's house tonight and catch him. We 'ave ze advantage of numbers, and Aurore's fightin' skills ain't enough to stop us. We can even get reinforcements from ze city if needed."

Guillaume... The padre is here too... Lumian stopped, retreating into the corner to eavesdrop on their conversation to see what plans the padre had for him.

Guillaume Bénet's voice was mesmerizing.

"Surely, you don't think that's the extent of Aurore's capabilities? I wouldn't be surprised if she had supernatural abilities beyond mine."

"Ah..." Pons Bénet was obviously surprised. "A witch, you say?

Guillaume, maybe it's time for you to venture to Dariège and seek out ze Inquisition. If you can catch a true witch, ze Church will undoubtedly grant you a great reward. And wiz zat, you may finally attain ze extraordinary strength you've been yearnin' for all zese years."
"Imbecile," Guillaume Bénet scolded his brother. "Don't you know what's happening in this village? The Inquisition has noses like hounds. They won't overlook any anomalies. When the time comes, we'll be in hot water."
"Even if Aurore desires to deal with us, I have other solutions," he said. "We mustn't arouse the Inquisition's attention."
So, what is happening in the village now? Lumian took this seriously and was curious.
Combining his observations of abnormalities, he sensed that something terrible was brewing and developing in the village, like a turbulent undercurrent under the calm sea.
To Lumian's dismay, Pons Bénet didn't elaborate on the topic. Instead, he focused on something else.
"Do you 'ave any way to deal wiz a Witch?"
"You don't need to know," the padre, Guillaume Bénet, responded in a hushed tone. "Next, we can put aside dealing with Lumian, but we still have to maintain appearances. We can't let anyone suspect my desire for revenge. That will provide the connections the foreigners need and have a negative impact. What you need to do now is to remind each relevant person and scare those yokels who might notice. Don't let them spill the beans in front of those foreigners."
"Guillaume, you mean zat zose foreigners are 'ere to investigate zat matter?" Pons Bénet appeared fearful and concerned.
Look at you. All brawn, no brains. You're nothing like your brother, a natural-born leader... Lumian mocked Pons Bénet inwardly.
Despite his disdain for the padre, whom he saw as a crude and greedy stallion rather than a man of the cloth, Lumian couldn't deny that he had a certain rugged charm. His direct, domineering style and clear mind won over the masses in the countryside, making it easy for them to idolize and rely on him.
Guillaume Bénet sneered.
"No need to worry. So long as those foreigners don't find any real evidence, I'll still be the padre of Cordu.
"Pons, you need to understand that ruling through fear and intimidation won't lead to peace or prosperity. The Church doesn't want a ruined town that can't pay taxes. We need friends and followers to maintain control. By offering them protection, we can gain their support.

"The Church trusts us locals with our relatives, friends, and followers to handle matters here and doesn't bring in outsiders who could make a mess. As long as there's no solid evidence, the higher-ups will continue to believe in me.
"Alright, I'm off to the cathedral."
That does sound logical and persuasive, but your wisdom and insight are limited to Dariège... Aurore told me that when the Church confronts villages that are overrun with evil gods, they obliterate them entirely and raze the land to the ground. They don't just slay the adults, but even the kids... Lumian found himself almost swayed by Guillaume Bénet's words. Luckily, Aurore had warned him about the fearsome reputation of the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun and the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery.
After the padre departed, Lumian took a different path and made it back home unscathed.
Aurore, clad in a pristine apron, bustled about the oven.
"What are you up to?" Lumian inquired with curiosity.
It was still two hours to lunchtime.
Aurore tucked a strand of her blonde locks behind her ear and beamed, "Trying out a new toast recipe. Rice bread."
"You don't have to go through all this trouble..." Lumian was moved to his core.
He believed Aurore was going out of her way to make something special just for him.
Aurore giggled and retorted, "What are you thinking? Can you be any more self-absorbed?"
"For me, baking is a form of amusement. It's a great way to pass the time. You get it?"
"Then why don't you like going out? There's plenty of fun out there," Lumian probed. He always felt Aurore was a homebody because she was too concerned about the risks her Warlock status posed.
Aurore swiveled her head and shot him a withering glare.
"You mean drinking and gambling?"
"Remember, I'm my own person, not relying on or attaching to others."
Lumian grasped the first half of her statement but was at a loss with the latter.
"Ah? Could you expound on that?"
Aurore gave him a deadly glare.
"Long story short, your sis is a major introvert most of the time!"
"What do you mean by most of the time?" Lumian queried, confused.

"Humans are walking contradictions," Aurore mused, turning back to the oven. "Don't you recall? Sometimes, I'm a chatterbox, eager to venture out and listen to the old ladies' gossip. Other times, I'll play with the kids and regale them with tales. Every so often, I'll cut loose and ride Madame Pualis' horse around the mountains, hollering at the top of my lungs."
At the time, you shone like a dew-kissed rose, luring people in only to prick them... Lumian couldn't help but grumble to himself.
Since Madame Pualis was mentioned, Lumian decided to change the subject.
"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, I heard a rumor about Madame Pualis."
"What is it?" Aurore did not hide her curiosity.
"She's a Warlock who can talk to the dead..." Lumian related to his sister what Ava had divulged. He also brought up the anomaly he'd observed and Guillaume Bénet's comments.
Aurore halted her work and listened to her brother's account intently.
Her mien grew noticeably graver.
After Lumian had finished, Aurore offered him a smile and assuaged his fears.
"Don't fret too much. Those three foreigners must be here for something that the padre and his comrades did in secret. It might have to do with Madame Pualis.
"Don't mess with Madame Pualis for now. I'll keep an eye on them.
"Explore the village more, mingle with those foreigners, and try to suss out what's going on. Heh heh, compared to that, the lady who gave you the Wand card is far more intriguing.
"If things do deteriorate, we must contemplate departing Cordu. We can start making arrangements now."
"Okay." Lumian nodded in agreement.
After a brief silence, he inquired curiously, "Aurore, if we must depart Cordu, where do you envision moving to?"
"Trier!" Aurore declared without hesitation.
Trier was the capital of the Intis Republic, the apex of culture and art across the continent.
"Why?" Despite considering Trier himself, Lumian posed the question casually.
Every Intisian coveted a chance to visit Trier.
In the eyes of the Triers, there were only two types of individuals in Intis: Triers and outsiders.
Aurore responded nonchalantly, "A prophet once said, 'As long as Trier endures, mirth and glee will never falter.'"
",

Chapter 13: Attempt

It was the dead of night, and all was quiet.

Lumian stirred in his dream once more. The first thing he glimpsed was a faint gray mist.

On impulse, he reached into his shirt pocket with his hand.

The frigid sensation of cold, hard metal immediately registered in his mind.

He retrieved the object he'd felt. A glint of gold illuminated his eyes.

It was a gold coin.

A Louis d'or.

It's still here... Lumian sat up and peered down at himself.

He still donned the cotton attire, pants, and leather jacket from his last expedition. The nearly two-meter-long steel pitchfork and sharp, iron-black axe rested within arm's reach.

This was precisely the same condition as when he'd exited the dream.

In other words, this dream is persistent. It doesn't reset with each entry... Lumian fiddled with the Louis d'or and slipped it into his cotton shirt's inner pocket.

Though it couldn't be actualized, it was still a joy to have.

Lumian rose from bed and gazed out the window for a spell, ensuring the red mountain peak in the ruins hadn't changed.

He hoisted his axe and pitchfork, departed his chamber, and entered the dimly lit corridor.

Aurore's bedroom and study doors remained ajar.

Lumian studied them briefly, then suddenly conceived an idea.

In the dream, my room is practically identical to reality. It contains all the expected elements. Aurore's room appears the same at first glance.

However, can I locate her witchcraft notebook, secret potion formula, or learn how to become a Warlock in her quarters?

This notion was akin to a devil's whisper, causing Lumian's heart to race. He was tempted to try.

Compared to exploring the unknown, hazardous, enigmatic ruins, sifting through Aurore's room was the simpler, safer option.

No, no! Lumian shook his head vigorously and cast the idea aside.

He'd rather take his chances than violate Aurore's privacy. He wouldn't venture into her bedroom without her approval.

This was due to his respect for Aurore.

If it weren't for Aurore, he would have perished as a child on the streets five years ago.

Lumian withdrew his pained gaze and made his way to the stairs.

If the occupant of the room wasn't Aurore, he would have already delved in to search for useful information.
Once downstairs, Lumian didn't hasten his departure. Instead, he inspected the provisions in the kitchen.
The olive oil, corn oil, and animal fat that Aurore had amassed were neatly arranged in buckets and cans, just like in reality.
Almost instinctively, Lumian lifted the bucket of corn oil and positioned it near the stove.
His sole reason for selecting it was that animal fat and olive oil were pricier.
Then he adeptly kindled a blaze in the hearth with coal and wood, and fashioned a couple of torches to ignite.
He was preparing to incinerate that monster.
Naturally, it would be preferable if there were other options. That was a last resort.
After completing these tasks, he retrieved his axe, opened the door, and departed.
Lumian then observed something unusual.
The faint gray mist that suffused the dream felt more humid than before. The ground beneath his feet was also slightly muddy.
It rained? This place persists and develops naturally according to certain laws when I'm absent or dreaming? Lumian was somewhat taken aback, but he had an inkling that it was only fitting.
Recalling Aurore's bizarre tales, he suddenly had a notion.
This can't be the real world, can it?
My dream is connected to the genuine world. That tarot card enables me to traverse the barrier between dream and the ruins while conscious?
Lumian swiftly surveyed his surroundings and realized that an endless gray fog bordered both sides of the ruins, on the dream's periphery.
I'll check later. I won't venture into the ruins. I'll stroll out of the gray fog and see if it's a surreal and irrational dream after passing through the gray fog, or if there's tangible land, sky, village, and town...
If it were the former, it signified that this place was still a dream. If it wasn't, Lumian had to confirm which world this was.
He surmised that based on the usage of the Louis d'or, this place still appeared to be in the Intis Republic, but it might not be the present era. It could be a location that had vanished decades or centuries ago.
However, Lumian sensed that there was a high likelihood that he wouldn't be able to exit the encompassing gray fog.
He gathered his thoughts and proceeded toward the ruins.

He didn't forget that the purpose of entering the dream was to attempt to contend with that monster.
After traversing a hundred to two hundred meters in the muddy wilderness riddled with gravel and crevices, Lumian abruptly halted.
He thought of a problem.
He'd overlooked something in his preparations earlier!
Previously, his two-story abode lacked any flames. It was quite secure in this world cloaked in gray fog. But now, it had a blazing furnace that emitted light. *Would it draw in a swarm of monsters and render the safe zone unsafe?*
Lumian instinctively turned his head and peered in the direction he'd come from. He observed that a scarlet gleam had been etched on various glass windows at the base of the half-submerged two-story structure in the faint gray mist.
It was akin to a beacon in the dark world.
Considering that a considerable amount of time had elapsed, it was evidently too late to attempt to extinguish the fire. Lumian hastened his pace and entered the ruins, taking refuge in the building that had crumbled due to a conflagration.
He clipped the axe to the back of his belt and agilely scaled a wall, concealing himself in a shadowy nook separated by bricks and timber.
Lumian gazed at his home on the other side of the wilderness.
As time ticked by, he didn't witness any monsters lured by the fire.
Seems like the fire won't trigger any changes. At the very least, my house won't be besieged by monsters... Lumian breathed a sigh of relief.
This meant that even if he encountered any peril, as long as he could flee home promptly and slumber as soon as possible, he could successfully elude it.
He began to contemplate how to entice and eliminate the previous monster.
From their brief skirmish, he'd deduced that its strength, speed, reaction time, and agility were similar to his, but he could sense that it fought on instinct. It lacked sufficient experience, expertise, or corresponding intelligence. That's why he'd been able to counter and slay it when it ambushed him...
It'll also be bewildered and taken aback. It's not dissimilar to humans...
Other than combat techniques, I have two other advantages over it. Firstly, I possess superior intelligence. Secondly, I know how to wield weapons and utilize tools. This is the greatest advantage humans possess over such monsters...

As long as I'm cautious, defeating it again won't be arduous. The most crucial aspect is how to eradicate it completely...
Just as Lumian was about to deliberately stir up some commotion to see if he could lure over some monster, he spied a figure stealthily approaching the utterly ruined house on the side.
The figure was crimson and devoid of skin. Its muscles, blood vessels, and fascia were exposed. It was the monster from last time.
Unlike before, this monster was wielding a manure fork.
A manure fork!
It knows how to wield weapons too... Lumian's countenance stiffened as his expression turned grim.
Unwittingly, his confidence waned a bit.
As the monster drew closer and turned, Lumian perceived exaggerated wounds on its back, neck, and the nape of its neck. However, the fissures were no longer oozing pus, and it appeared to have mostly mended.
It's indeed the one I encountered previously...
Its self-healing ability is many times superior to that of ordinary humans...
Lumian gasped soundlessly.
He compelled himself to compose and expeditiously assessed the situation.
In the twinkling of an eye, Lumian arrived at a determination.
This was a prime opportunity, and he had to seize it when he encountered it. He couldn't let it slip by!
He silently retrieved a stone brick beside him and awaited the monster's arrival at the desired location.
In just a few strides, the monster entered Lumian's kill zone.
Lumian abruptly hurled the stone brick at the ground behind the monster.
Thud!
The stone brick clattered, causing the monster to swivel around and scrutinize the assailant.
Upon beholding this, Lumian seized the axe with both hands and pounced fiercely from the wall towards the monster.
Bang!
The axe descended heavily onto the monster's neck, cleaving it in two.
With twin thuds, Lumian and the monster plummeted to the ground simultaneously.
Lumian sprang up nimbly, seized his axe, and darted over, delivering weighty slashes to the monster's neck.
Once, twice, thrice. The monster didn't even get a chance to resist

before its head was lopped off.
As the head rolled aside, the skinless body convulsed twice and ceased movement.
Lumian didn't halt there. He took a diagonal step, rotated his axe, and pulverized the vicious head with its thick back, reducing it to fragments.
Subsequently, he pivoted and hacked at the exposed muscles, blood vessels, and fascia, crushing the heart and other vital organs.
After accomplishing all of this, Lumian took two paces backward and surveyed his handiwork. He panted and chuckled softly.
"I thought you were truly invincible. Who'd have thought you possessed so little ability!"
Amidst the subdued laughter, the decapitated cadaver abruptly jolted upward.
Lumian's pupils contracted, and he instinctively wished to pivot and flee.
He forcefully quelled this impulse and strode forward once more, brandishing his axe.
After the corpse bounced twice, it reverted to immobility, as if it had writhed in vain.
Lumian scrutinized it a while longer and ultimately verified that the monster was wholly deceased.
How tenacious... Lumian sighed inwardly. Then, he leaned over and crouched down. He employed his axe to pry open the muscles and fascias and scrutinized the corpse.
The monster's bodily structure wasn't dissimilar to a human's, but its muscles were evidently more animated. Even though it was already dead, some of its incisions were still wriggling slightly.
There's no treasure, nor is there any supernatural power transferred into my body... Lumian assessed his present state and felt somewhat disenchanted.
The adage that one grows stronger with each monster they slay indeed only existed in Aurore's tales.
He then relocated the monster's corpse and head into the ruined building and entombed them with bricks and timber.
Subsequently, he scoured the burnt-down house, hoping to discover something.

Chapter 14: Different Monster

After a bout of searching, Lumian stumbled upon a considerable number of gold coins, silver coins, and copper coins. In total, there were 197 verl d'or and 25 coppet.

Among them, Louis d'or alone constituted five.

As for the paper bills, he only discovered some suspected remnants.

Aside from money, Lumian also discovered a small blue book.

The book had a grayish-blue cover and measured approximately 21 by 28.5 centimeters, a typical size found in Intis villages and towns.

It was based on the calendar and blended with the religious teachings of the two major Churches. It had a rather positive effect on guiding farmers and herders to farm, produce, and graze to enrich their spiritual lives.

Naturally, even though it had been nearly two centuries since Emperor Roselle advocated compulsory education, there were still a large number of farmers, herdsmen, and workers who knew no more than a handful of words and were illiterate. They could only rely on the explanations of certain people around them to obtain the instructions they needed from the blue book, literally known as livre bleu.

Lumian flipped through a few pages nonchalantly and realized that the livre bleu was no different from his own. It was just that it appeared a little older overall.

There's the livre bleu and so much verl d'or; this family is undoubtedly well-to-do in the countryside. *There aren't more than five such families in Cordu...* Lumian discarded the livre bleu and placed the gold coins, silver coins, and copper coins into different pockets. Some were stashed deep in the cotton shirt's pocket, some were tucked into his pants pocket, and some were haphazardly stuffed into the pocket of his leather jacket.

Even though Lumian knew that this wealth couldn't be brought to reality, he couldn't resist collecting it for safekeeping.

These little trinkets of gold, silver, or copper were simply irresistible.

During his days as a vagrant, he cherished every coin he came across, even if it was just a coppet or a lick. He often fought with others for them and took risks to obtain them.

After scouting the area, Lumian hoisted his axe and crept towards the collapsed building closer to the reddish-brown mountain peak.

He proceeded deeper and deeper. Every time he traversed the empty space in the center of the ring, he was apprehensive that

dozens of monsters would suddenly ambush him in an area without cover.
In the faint gray fog, Lumian crouched down and sneaked behind a half-collapsed stone wall. He squatted there and utilized it to conceal his form.
He cautiously poked his head out and surveyed the area ahead.
It was a narrow strip between two rows of destroyed buildings. There were no trees, no weeds, just gravel, crevices, and dirt.
Suddenly, a figure jumped into Lumian's line of sight.
It stood in the opposing building, staring at something.
This figure was garbed in a black robe with a hood. From the back, there was nothing peculiar. It appeared to be an ordinary human.
Lumian's heart constricted as he became even more watchful.
In such a dream ruin, the appearance of a regular person was far more terrifying than the appearance of a monster!
As if sensing that someone was observing him, the figure swiveled around slowly.
Lumian snuck a quick glance before retracting his head hastily. He leaned against the wall and didn't dare to budge.
With just one look, he had the impression that he had descended into hell or an abyss.
The figure was indeed a human, but 'he' had three faces and six eyes!
The face in front had cloudy eyes, sparse eyebrows, and numerous wrinkles. He was evidently an old man.
The left side was a chiseled face with sharp-looking blue eyes and a thick, black beard, making him appear like a burly man.
The skin on the right side was smooth and delicate, like a peeled egg. The blue eyes exuded obvious innocence and ignorance. It didn't seem a day over five years of age.
What kind of monster is this... Lumian attempted to regulate his breathing to prevent his heart from racing.
Such a monster had never surfaced, even in Aurore's horror tales. Only in the deepest and most absurd nightmares could it be encountered.
Although it was not good to judge a 'person' by their appearance, Lumian instinctively sensed that the three-faced monster was far more powerful than the skinless monster from earlier!
Furthermore, there was a high probability that it had exceptional abilities.
Eternal Blazing Sun. Great Father, please protect me from being discovered by it... Upon witnessing this scene, Lumian couldn't help but pray to the Eternal Blazing Sun.
If he weren't still clutching an axe in one hand and was in a

perilous environment, he would have extended his arms, a gesture symbolizing the adoration of the sun.
At that moment, time appeared to stand still. Lumian believed he might be hallucinating.
It was as if someone's stare pierced through the wall and landed on his back.
His back stiffened instantly and felt somewhat warm.
In just a second or two, the illusion vanished, and heavy footsteps receded into the distance.
Lumian waited a while until the footsteps dissipated completely. Then, he gradually straightened his knees, turned around, and poked his head out to survey the area ahead.
The monster was farther away, having arrived behind the collapsed building whose two sides still stood. Half of its body was visible in the faint gray mist.
It still had his back to Lumian, as though it had transformed into a statue.
Lumian breathed a sigh of relief.
He didn't have the confidence to confront such a monster.
It's definitely impossible to venture deeper into the ruins from here... *Should I circumvent it?*
Won't there be comparable monsters elsewhere?
The closer I approach that mountain peak, the more potent the monsters that emerge?
Lumian retracted his body and deliberated for a while before deciding to conclude the night.
He intended to inquire with the woman who gave him the tarot card after daybreak to see if there was a means of dealing with the three-faced monster. If there was no alternative, he would consider taking a detour.
He arched his back, detached from the wall, and headed in the direction he came from.
At that moment, he had a notion.
If I slumber in these ruins, will I be able to escape the dream?
Considering the possibility of numerous monsters in the vicinity, he suppressed the urge to experiment, for now.
On the way back, he hastily searched every destroyed building he passed, but he couldn't unearth any useful written information. There were only a few coins.
After retreating for a while, Lumian conceived a notion and decided to take a detour. He approached the burnt-out house that he encountered first from the side, where he had buried the skinless monster.
He wanted to see if the monster's demise would be detected by its

kin and if it would result in any changes.
After locating the spot and concealing himself, Lumian poked his head out from the side and scrutinized the target area.
In the following moment, he caught sight of another "figure."
The figure was half-human and half-beast. Its legs were bent forward as it squatted there and inspected the skinless monster's cadaver.
It had already removed the stone bricks and wooden blocks that Lumian had stacked.
It wore a dark jacket and relatively snug muddy pants. Its black hair that hung to its neck was unkempt and greasy, and it carried a shotgun on its back.
A shotgun!
Lumian averted his gaze hastily and withdrew his head.
These monsters are truly absurd!
They actually know how to wield a shotgun...
At that moment, Lumian felt like he was a hunter, hunting in the mountains with his weapon and comrades, only to discover that the rabbit opposite him was clutching a water-cooled machine gun and targeting them. He considered it ridiculous and immersion-breaking, as well as disappointing.
As time elapsed, he waited patiently for the monster with the shotgun to depart.
Finally, he discerned a faint sound of movement, gradually receding.
Lumian stuck his head out cautiously once again and examined the monster that was half-human and half-beast.
"It" moved like a cat towards the back of the building.
Initially, Lumian's heart eased, but then his eyes widened.
He realized that the path the monster took was precisely the same as the route he took when he ventured deep into the ruins!
It's tracking me!
It has an extraordinary tracking ability!
Lumian made a subconscious evaluation.
He was exceedingly grateful that he had opted for a detour when he returned. Otherwise, he would have certainly collided with it and might have even been ambushed!
As soon as the monster vanished, Lumian sprang up and dashed towards his house.
The crimson fire that reflected in the glass window on the ground floor of the house was akin to sunlight that could dispel darkness.
Lumian sprinted all the way to his two-story building, yanked open the unlatched door, and rushed inside.
After locking the door, he gazed at the ruins through the window.

Far from the gray mist, at the edge of the ruins, there stood a faint figure, but it didn't approach.
Phew. Lumian exhaled and planned to extinguish the fire, ascend upstairs to slumber, and exit the dream.
He glanced at the still-burning fire and murmured to himself, It can still burn for a while... I can experiment and see if it continues to burn until it extinguishes after I depart the dream, or if it is frozen in time the moment I leave...
Lumian had previously verified through the rain that the wilderness where the ruins were located was undergoing natural development. It had nothing to do with whether he was dreaming or not, but whether the same situation was transpiring in his house or the so-called safe zone remained to be verified.
He acted on his notion. He added a few more coals to the fire and fiddled with them. Then, he carried the axe and steel fork to the second floor and entered the bedroom.
...
When Lumian arose, it was just after daybreak.
He inspected his shirt-like pajamas. As anticipated, he was disheartened to discover that the gold coins, silver coins, and copper coins did not accompany him into reality.
Lumian exited the bed and stretched his body. He sauntered to the desk and extended his hand to draw the curtains.
Amidst the sound, a mild and refreshing radiance trickled in.
As the window opened, fresh and organic air invaded Lumian's nostrils. He couldn't help but extend himself, feeling that waking up early was quite pleasant at times.
Of course, this was also owing to the "Patriotic Public Health Campaign" that Emperor Roselle had launched. It was also thanks to the subsequent rulers who had preserved it and only altered its name.
He surveyed his surroundings, sometimes gazing at the far-off forest, sometimes scrutinizing the orange-red clouds in the sky, and sometimes observing the weeds outside the house.
Suddenly, Lumian's stare froze.
He spied a larger bird perched on an elm tree not far away.
It had a pointed beak, a feline face, brown feathers with scattered spots, brownish-yellow eyes combined with black pupils, giving it a sharp appearance.
It was an owl.
It appeared to be observing Lumian.

Chapter 15: Getting Information

That owl?
That owl from the Warlock legend?
His mind raced with possibilities, trying to comprehend the gravity of the situation. His blood seemed to freeze.
It was worse than facing the three-faced monster.
After all, this was no longer a dream. This was reality.
Even if his demise in a dream led to the same in reality, it was different psychologically.
What should I do?
Will Aurore be implicated?
...
As Lumian racked his brain for a countermeasure, the owl remained still, observing him with a piercing gaze.
After a few seconds, the owl spread its wings and flew towards the distant forest.
Its graceful glide carried it down, down, until it vanished into Cordu.
Only when the owl had completely vanished did Lumian's mind snap back to the present.
He slumped into a chair and lifted a hand to his forehead.
He was drenched in sweat.
Is it truly the owl of the Warlock legend?
Has it truly lived for so many years?
In any case, it was unlike any other owl with dull eyes. It almost looked human...
If it's really that owl, why did it choose to fly just outside my window? Is it because I want to uncover the truth about the Warlock legend? But we've already given up…
It left after a few moments of observation...
I wonder if it will return and cause trouble for Aurore...
Despite wanting to observe the situation further since nothing had happened yet, Lumian knew he couldn't keep it from his sister any longer.
After leaving the room, he saw that Aurore was still asleep. He went downstairs to prepare breakfast, all of which were his sister's favorite dishes.
Sunny-side up, meringue cookies, ordinary toast with jam...
I have to make noodles later. This time, I'll add meat sauce... Lumian mentally noted that the noodle compartment was empty and decided to refill it some time in the next two days.
It was Aurore's favorite dish.
Aurore descended the staircase in a flowing nightgown, her golden

locks tousled. The breakfast spread was readied.
"Morning," she mumbled, stifling a yawn.
Lumian grinned at her. "It's not getting early.
"Don't you always say a day's planning starts early in the morning?"
"That's right. My plan is to sleep." Aurore settled into her seat and tucked into her breakfast with a glass of milk.
Lumian sat across from Aurore At the table that could fit six. As he nibbled on a pancake, he casually said, "I've been in the village for the past few days trying to find out the truth about those legends."
"Why?" Aurore asked.
Lumian was very frank.
"You didn't want to help me get supernatural powers, so I decided to find my own way. Those legends might contain clues."
"It's almost impossible," Aurore commented, her tone casual. "The legends have been twisted beyond recognition over the years. Or hallucinated by some loony. It's meaningless. Yes, it's also possible that someone specially made up a story as an excuse. Heh heh, and the contributions of rubberneckers like you."
"What?" Lumian didn't understand what Aurore meant by 'rubbernecker.'
It wasn't even Intisian.
"It means people who can't help but get involved in drama they have no business in," Aurore explained simply. "And judging by how you are suddenly raising this matter, I'm guessing you've caused some trouble and now have no choice but to come home to ask your sister for help."
"It can be considered an accident, but it's not to the extent of causing trouble," Lumian said, undaunted.
Lumian organized his thoughts carefully.
"My first target was the Warlock legend."
"What Warlock legend?" Aurore's confusion was palpable.
Lumian couldn't believe it. "You've never heard of it? A long time ago, a person in the village suddenly died. When he was buried, an owl flew over and stopped by his bed. It only flew away when the corpse was lifted. After that, the corpse became very heavy. It took nine bulls to pull the coffin. Only then did the villagers know that the person was a Warlock when he was alive."
Aurore was listening intently.
"I really wasn't aware of such a legend before."
It doesn't make sense... Lumian was incredulous.
Aurore may have been a homebody, but she still made time to socialize with the other old ladies in town. She loved telling stories to the children and was always up-to-date on the latest Cordu

gossip. It was hard to believe she hadn't heard about the Warlock legend that had been circulating for years.
But what was even more intriguing was the fact that her house was built on the very spot where the Warlock's home once stood.
Lumian had a hunch from the start that Aurore's decision to settle in Cordu was driven by the allure of the Warlock's treasure, the key to unlocking extraordinary power.
"And then?" Aurore asked calmly.
Lumian answered truthfully, "We did some digging around, and we got confirmation from the village elders. This wasn't some tall tale. The Warlock really did exist, but that was decades ago. The Church burned the house down, and now the land belongs to you."
"Is that so?" Aurore was obviously a little surprised. "I knew it. There's always a catch. Why else would they sell me this land at a price lower than the norm? I thought it was because of my gift of gab, when it came to old ladies..."
She thought for a moment and asked, "So, the Church burned the Warlock's body?"
Lumian nodded. "Yes. His ashes are buried in the cemetery beside the cathedral."
He continued, "We've given up on this matter because all the clues led to a dead end. But this morning, I saw an owl outside my window. It looked just like the one in the legend."
Aurore's expression became serious. "Are you certain?"
"I can't say for sure, but it didn't look like any ordinary owl," Lumian responded objectively.
Aurore pondered for a moment before saying slowly, "Don't leave the village for now. And after dark, don't step outside until I've finished investigating the situation."
She gave a sour smile. "I've warned you before about the dangers of seeking supernatural power. But look, trouble has already found you.
"Fortunately, it seems that the other party doesn't have any malicious intentions. The problem should be resolved relatively easily."
I'm glad you're on guard... Lumian lowered his head and said straightforwardly, "Grande Soeur, I was wrong."
He changed the subject.
"Did your pen pals write back?"
"How can it be that fast? It's not like we're sending e— Uh, post!" Aurore scoffed.
Lumian was puzzled. Isn't post already referring to letters and packages sent through the post office?
He was not too concerned. After all, Aurore often used strange

words.
...
At the entrance of Ol' Tavern.
Lumian stood there and surveyed the area.
He knew that the woman who had given him the tarot card wouldn't be awake yet, so he was looking for the three foreigners: Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.
As expected, the trio was enjoying a lavish breakfast at a table inside the tavern.
Lumian observed them for a few seconds, taking in the spread of trout rolls, wine, and mayonnaise bread, before leaving without disturbing them.
Some time later, as Ryan and the others prepared to continue strolling around Cordu and "chatting" with the locals,
Lumian approached them with open arms and a bright smile.
"Good morning, my cabbages."
Valentine's face twitched, and between Ryan and Leah, one looked slightly embarrassed while the other looked amused.
Uh, they're dressed exactly the same… Did they not bring many changes of clothes despite being out? Lumian noticed that Leah was still clad in a snug pleated cashmere dress, a small white coat, and a pair of Marseillan boots, each adorned with a small silver bell. Her veil which doubled as a hat also had bells attached to it. Ryan was still sporting a drab duffel coat and pale yellow strides, topped with a rough dark bowler hat.
And Valentine still had powdered hair and makeup on his face.
"Good morning, Lumian. What brings you here?" Ryan asked calmly.
Lumian looked aggrieved as he responded, "Well, you guys are my friends, and I have nothing to do. I thought I'd come visit."
He then questioned them, "I noticed that you've been chatting with people in the village for the past few days. Is there anything you want to ask?
"You can come to me if you have any questions, my cabbages. I'm your friend."
"We can't trust your answer," Valentine interjected.
Ryan shot him a look, signaling him to calm down.
Lumian smiled.
"So you can completely trust the others?"
Leah was at a loss for words, while Ryan thought for a moment before responding,
"Actually, we can't completely trust anyone. We have to make a comprehensive judgment based on the answers we get from different people and the situation we observe."

"That's more like it." Lumian spread his hands. "Well, then it wouldn't hurt to hear my answer. At least it's a reference."
Ryan was silent for a moment before glancing around.
The early morning in Cordu was bustling with people heading to the farmlands, but there was hardly anyone near Ol' Tavern.
"Here's the deal," he said finally. "We're here to find someone."
"The padre?" Lumian asked with a smile.
Ryan shook his head.
"No. We visited the padre to find this person."
"Who is it?" Lumian asked with interest. "I know everyone in the village. I should be able to help."
Ryan did not show any joy.
"Actually, we don't know who this person is, how old they are, or what they look like.
"We received an unsigned letter some time ago, and we're trying to find the person who wrote it."
Lumian couldn't help but wonder if the letter was from an informer.
He feigned puzzlement.
"Did the person who wrote the letter not reach out to you after you arrived in the village?"
"No," Leah replied for Ryan.
"Perhaps they don't feel safe and don't trust you?" Lumian suggested eagerly. "Can't you glean any clues from the contents of the letter?"
Lumian was curious about the letter's contents.
If it was targeting the padre's crew, he'd be happy to help them. But if it involved Aurore, he'd urge his sister to move. After all, Aurore communicated with her pen pals frequently, and if any of them were caught, she could be implicated. The letter could be a crucial clue.

Chapter 16: Letter

Ryan shook his head.
"The letter was just two simple sentences. It seemed like a man in deep trouble was seeking our help."
"Did he not mention what kind of trouble he was in?" Lumian breathed a sigh of relief.
There was no way a letter from Aurore or her pen pals could be that short.
"Nothing," Ryan replied with a soft sigh.
Lumian couldn't help but mock them in his heart. *It's just a letter asking for help, and you're here? Aren't you afraid this is just a prank? Even the people from the Inquisition aren't as enthusiastic as you. Isn't this too nice, too kind, and too missionful?*
Normally, he would have voiced these thoughts aloud, but he needed to get information from them, so he held his tongue and forced himself to be patient.
Despite his reservations, Lumian knew that Ryan wouldn't reveal the entire situation to him. They must have other considerations or reasons for coming to Cordu and searching for the person who wrote the vague letter.
"Uh..." Lumian stroked his chin and suggested tentatively, "*Why don't you show me the letter?* Perhaps I can identify the writer from their handwriting."
Valentine, with his powdered hair, gave Lumian a look that said: "Do you think we're fools?"
Leah chuckled.
"Do you know how to appraise handwriting?"
"Barely," Lumian admitted sincerely.
He then added inwardly, Being able to appraise Aurore's and my own handwriting is also considered a form of appraisal.
"It's useless," Ryan interjected, shaking his head. "Every word in the letter came from a livre bleu, and the entire sentence was comprised of cut slips."
Lumian couldn't help but wonder why the writer was being so cautious. *Why hide their identity in such a way when they were asking for help? Were they afraid of interception and retaliation, or was there something wrong with them that they didn't want to be exposed?* Lumian tried to analyze the writer's mentality.
Lumian put on a look of realization and said, "So you've been chatting with people in the village to see if anyone else has experienced similar damage to their livre bleu?
"But the person who wrote the letter could have purchased a new livre bleu without anyone knowing, or even thrown it away after

using it."
"That's just one of the leads we're following," Ryan explained calmly.
Lumian didn't treat himself as an outsider at all and asked, "Are there any other leads?"
"Well, if someone is asking for help, then something must be happening, and there will always be some traces left behind," Ryan responded after some thought.
"That makes sense," Lumian said, looking troubled for Ryan and the others, as if he could empathize with their situation.
He promised solemnly, "My cabbages, I'll keep an eye out for you. Hopefully, we'll find some clues."
"Thank you," Ryan replied politely.
Leah had regained her composure and asked Lumian, "Since we're friends, I have a question for you."
"Go ahead." Lumian smiled.
"Why did the villagers in the tavern laugh when you called us 'cabbage'?" Leah was rather intrigued.
Although it was embarrassing, 'cabbage' was a common local slang term, and it shouldn't have been a cause for laughter.
Lumian explained sincerely, "In slang, 'cabbage' means darling or beloved. It's mainly used between intimate friends or between an elder and a junior. 'My bunny' and 'my chicks' are similar."
He emphasized the word 'intimate' as he spoke.
Then, with an innocent expression, he added, "I just wanted us to be intimate friends."
Lumian's innocent expression suggested that he had no idea what 'intimate' meant.
More like you want to be our senior... Leah finally understood why the villagers were laughing.
While Lumian's explanation may not have been entirely truthful, it was logically convincing.
Ryan nodded in agreement.
"Is there anything else?"
"Nope," Lumian replied, not wanting to appear too eager and arouse suspicion about him and Aurore.
His sister couldn't undergo an investigation!
After watching Leah and the others leave with the sound of the tinkling bells, Lumian sat at the entrance of Ol' Tavern and waited for the lady with the mysterious background to wake up.
After a while, Lumian's friend, Reimund Greg, approached him.
"Lumian, have you decided which legend to investigate next?" Reimund asked.
In the past two days, Reimund had been even more proactive than

Lumian in this matter. After all, he didn't have any strange dreams or other ways of obtaining treasure.
"Not yet." The owl had already come knocking on his door. He couldn't risk investigating the legend without confirming the situation first.
"I'll think about it after the Lent festival," Lumian explained, trying to sound casual.
"Okay, that makes sense," Reimund agreed. "I don't have to be a Greenwatcher for the time being then. I'll head out after Lent. Even if there are grazers in the meantime, it won't cause much damage."
"Do you mean you don't have to leave the village for the next few days?" Lumian asked Reimund.
Reimund nodded in confirmation, and Lumian smiled.
"What a coincidence. I can't leave the village for the next few days either."
Reimund was confused. "Why not?" he asked.
Lumian lowered his voice and spoke with a serious expression.
"This morning, I met the owl from the Warlock legend. It said that if it weren't for the cathedral and the gaze of God in the village, it would have taken my soul and thrown it into the abyss..."
Reimund was shocked and frightened, and his entire body trembled.
"Is that for real? I told you not to provoke such an evil creature..."
Reimund suddenly saw a smile appear on Lumian's face.
"..." Only then did Reimund remember his good friend's nature.
"You're pulling a prank on me, it's a lie, isn't it?" he asked, feeling both angry and anxious.
He was angry at himself for falling for Lumian's deception yet again. He knew what kind of person Lumian was and had been fooled by him many times before.
"You believe such a ridiculous thing?" Lumian chuckled.
Quietly, Lumian added to himself that he had made up the story to prevent Reimund from going straight to the cathedral to repent when he couldn't withstand the pressure.
Reimund relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief. "Phew..."
Lumian offered some advice to Reimund.
"Although I made up that story just now, it's true that pursuing the truth of a legend can be dangerous. Try not to leave the village or the cathedral's protection if you can."
Silently, Lumian added to himself, And that's the truth. Although most of the story was fabricated, half of it was true. I wouldn't have reminded you and shared Aurore's advice in a different way if I didn't need your help with many things in the future. Whether

someone lives or dies has nothing to do with me...
Reimund recalled the feeling of fear and nodded in understanding. "Alright!"
He changed the subject and asked, "Who are you going to vote for to be the Spring Elf?"
The Spring Elf was the symbol of spring and the start of many celebrations during Lent. In the DariÃ¨ge area, the whole village usually voted for an unwed, beautiful girl to play the role.
"Ava," Lumian replied nonchalantly. "Hasn't she always wanted to be the Spring Elf?"
"I'll choose her too," Reimund said, secretly relieved.
Yesterday, Ava had hinted to him that she wanted him to vote for her, so he felt the need to help her canvas for votes.
...
Outside a house not far from Ol' Tavern.
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine weren't in a hurry to find someone to "chat."
Valentine raised his hand to cover his mouth and nose. "Is it really okay to say so much to that guy just now?" he asked.
The air around them was filled with the faint smell of poultry feces.
Leah fiddled with a silver bell above her head. "I don't know if there's a problem. All I can confirm is that my divination results tell me he's of help."
Ryan explained his intention. "If we can't turn the situation around, leaking some information and instilling fear in the relevant people could be effective. Next, we'll observe him more closely and see what he'll do or who he'll find."
...
After Reimund left, Lumian entered Ol' Tavern and saw the lady who had given him the tarot card in her usual spot.
She was wearing a white blouse and a pair of baggy light-colored pants, and beside her hand was a round straw hat adorned with a few yellow flowers.
She really has a lot of clothes in her suitcase. She changes them every day, unlike Leah and the others who look so shabby, Lumian thought to himself as he moved closer and sat opposite her.
During this process, he casually glanced at her breakfast, which consisted of a plump mince pie with a thinned sauce, a few darioles, cubed seasonal fruit, and a light-colored transparent drink with some impurities.
This isn't something Ol' Tavern can provide... Lumian pointed at the drink on the table and asked the lady, as though they were close friends, "What is this? It doesn't look like wine."

"It's called 'Venus Sacred Oil,'" the lady replied casually. "It's made from sugar and cinnamon water soaked in vanilla and mixed with poppies. It was invented by a bar in Trier."
The word "Venus" came from Emperor Roselle. He mentioned in a story that she was a woman comparable to a Goddess of Beauty.
Lumian was intrigued. "Where did you get it? Did you concoct it yourself?" he asked, suspecting that the nearest city, DariÃ¨ge, couldn't provide something similar.
The lady smiled.
"As a traveler, it's my professional instinct to obtain suitable things at the right time."
Lumian was honest. "I don't understand."
He then said, "I've finished the previous monster. This time, I've encountered two even more dangerous ones...
He went on to describe the monster with three faces and the one with a shotgun on its back.
"I feel that they all have powers that surpass ordinary humans. They're not something I can deal with. Is there any way to deal with them?"
The lady took a bite of the dariole and rolled her eyes. She smiled and said, "I'm not sure about the three-faced monster, but you are more than capable of dealing with the one with the shotgun, as long as you use what's special about yourself."
Lumian was both surprised and confused. "A special trait... What's so special about me?"
I don't even know myself!
The lady smiled at him and said, "That's your dream. As the owner of the dream, you naturally enjoy special treatment. It's just that you haven't realized it yet."

Chapter 17: Suspect

Lumian was on edge, his mind racing with excitement and fear. "What is it exactly?"

The woman took a leisurely sip of Venus Sacred Oil before replying in a calm, unhurried tone.

"You have to ask yourself that."

Having said that, she lowered her head slightly and focused on enjoying her breakfast, giving the impression that she had no intention of continuing the conversation.

Why do you keep parts of the matter untold and only answer at the next opportunity? Isn't this a waste of everyone's time? He couldn't help but feel inferior to her ability to infuriate others.

Taking a deep breath, he forced a smile and bade farewell.

Lumian obediently spent the rest of the day at home.

This wasn't out of fear of the owl to the point of not daring to step out during the day, nor was it because he had nothing to do, but to avoid arousing suspicion.

Lumian was determined to get to the bottom of the help-seeking letter that Leah and her companions had in their possession. He needed to find out what was written and who wrote it. The key to his investigation was to flip through every livre bleu in the village and find the one with words cut out. As a villager, Lumian was best suited for this task, but he was hesitant to proceed after talking to the three foreigners. It could attract someone's attention and cause unnecessary trouble.

This was a matter of life and death, survival or doom, and Lumian knew that even with Aurore's protection, he couldn't guarantee that the other party wouldn't take any risky actions against him.

In the past two years, he had become better at figuring out the threshold required for pranks.

This was due to his rich experience.

He planned on "visiting" every family in a few days, using the excuse of pursuing the legends related to Lent.

After dinner, when it was dark, Aurore returned to her bedroom to finally write a manuscript that was long overdue.

Lumian entered the study planning to find some books related to dreams to read, hoping to gain some special inspiration for his dream.

As they only had one battery-powered table lamp at home, which was being used by Aurore, he had to light up the kerosene lamp that had a pungent smell and was not great for illumination purposes.

Carrying the kerosene lamp that emitted a dim yellow glow,

Lumian quickly swiped his other hand across the backs of the books. Occasionally, he would choose a book and clamp it under his armpit.
After a while, he returned to the table with three selected books.
Just as he placed the books in his hand, Lumian saw the livre bleu at home.
It was quietly placed in a corner of the desk as usual, and the gray-blue cover seemed a little dusty.
Upon seeing this livre bleu, Lumian instantly thought of the book he had obtained in the dream ruins and the book that had been cut and meshed into a plea for help.
He reached out and picked up the livre bleu in front of him, planning to flip through the content to see which words were suitable for cutting and piecing into useful sentences.
After flipping through a few pages, Lumian's gaze froze.
There was an obvious hole in the notes attached to the current calendar page.
A word had been cut out!
"No way..." Lumian whispered, extremely shocked.
He quickly flipped through the livre bleu in his hand and found more than ten words cut out.
"No way..." Lumian whispered again, his reaction almost the same as before.
The livre bleu that Ryan, Leah, Valentine, and the others were searching for turned out to be the one at home!
Not only had they not expected it, but Lumian had never even fathomed this possibility!
It didn't even cross his mind!
Amidst the indescribably complicated emotions, Lumian frowned.
Could it be Aurore who requested help?
Why did she seek help from the officials? Why didn't she tell me?
Based on Leah and the others' behavior, their habitual choice to discuss matters with the padre as soon as they arrived, and other details, Lumian made a preliminary judgment that they were officials. They could be from the government, Dariège's Eternal Blazing Sun Church, or the God of Steam and Machinery Church.
Lumian hesitated, his expression constantly changing.
Finally, he made up his mind. He took the livre bleu and walked out of the study to Aurore's bedroom.
He planned on asking her directly and chose to believe in Aurore.
Knock! Knock! Knock! Lumian bent his finger and knocked on the door.
"Come on in." Aurore's voice sounded.
Lumian turned the handle and pushed open the door to enter.

Under the bright light of the table lamp, Aurore, who was wearing a two-piece cotton pajama set, had bound her golden hair with a headband and was engrossed in writing a story.
"Did you cut this?" Lumian asked, interrupting his sister before she could speak.
"Huh?" Aurore turned around in confusion, her eyes blank and distant, as if she was still deep in thought.
Lumian handed over the livre bleu, which had been flipped to the corresponding page, and stared into Aurore's eyes.
"You didn't cut this?"
Aurore gazed at it carefully for a few seconds before looking up in amusement.
"Would I be so bored and childish? I'm steady, mature, and broadminded, unlike you."
Aurore's reaction was natural, and she didn't seem surprised or flustered that her secret had been exposed. Lumian didn't hide his confusion and asked, "But who would have cut out words from the livre bleu?"
"Wasn't it you?" Aurore sized up her brother. "After reading my novel, you planned on mimicking what you read and cut out words from books and newspapers to create a random letter to play a huge prank on the village. But before that, you wanted to see if you could fool me? Are you testing my deductive abilities?"
This really doesn't seem like Aurore's doing... Lumian's gaze was fixed on Aurore's face, not letting go of even the slightest change in her expression, but his sister's performance was flawless.
"It wasn't me." Lumian frowned. "Who could have done it?"
Aurore smiled. "Go on and play your little game of deduction. I have a manuscript to finish. If I have time tomorrow, I'll help you figure out the truth."
Using extraordinary means? Lumian tersely acknowledged her words and stopped disturbing his sister's creation.
He took the livre bleu and returned to his unlit room, sitting on the chair behind the desk.
"Who could it be?" Under the illumination of the crimson moon, Lumian muttered, trying to make deductions.
We are a family of two. Aurore is a Warlock with extraordinary abilities. She won't let others ransack our home...
If it's really not her, and in her words, 'when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.'
So, in the case of having only two choices, I'm actually the one who did this?
For a moment, Lumian found it absurd and funny.

So I'm the 'criminal'?
Why don't I know that?
Lumian couldn't help but turn his body and look at the full-body mirror attached to the wardrobe.
Under the crimson moonlight, his mirror reflection was wearing a linen shirt and brown pants. His handsome features didn't have a smile on them, and his expression was abnormally heavy.
He was very sure that he had never cut out the content from the livre bleu.
To eliminate the possibility, he recalled his experiences in the past month.
Although many details were already a blur, he was still very certain about what he had done.
Bathing in the crimson moon's light that seeped in through the windows, Lumian muttered to himself, "Could it be that I did it when I was unconscious? While having that dream, I can sleepwalk in reality? No, that's impossible. Aurore said that she would watch me. If I really sleepwalked and cut the livre bleu, she would have pointed it out just now. Moreover, the letter must have been sent during the day. I'm very awake during those times."
Lumian eliminated himself and thought of other possibilities.
Someone else who came here, perhaps?
Although their family had few guests usually, it did not mean that they did not have any.
Firstly, poorer neighbors would come to borrow the stove or oven to smoke meat or make bread.
Secondly, Lumian's friends would come to his house from time to time to find some simple novels to read or listen to his stories.
Lastly, Nazélie, Madame Pualis, and a few other ladies visited Aurore from time to time to have a chat with her. Among them, Madame Pualis came the most. She even lent Aurore a pony so that Aurore could ride freely in the mountains. They were quite close.
After all, in a village like Cordu, only an author like Aurore was worthy of Madame Pualis' friendship.
Madame Pualis appeared very amiable on the surface, often basking in the sun with the other women and chatting with them, and even catching lice with them. She had a good reputation in the village.
Although Madame Pualis and Aurore could be considered friends, Lumian did not like her at all. Madame Pualis would often introduce one of her relatives to Aurore and persuade her to get married and have children as soon as possible.
It would be fine if Madame Pualis' relatives were nice, but every

time Lumian asked around in Darième, he found that the other party either had bad character or was not very capable. They were about to fall into poverty, and none of them made the cut.
The first time might have been a coincidence, but with it happening every time, Lumian bore a hatred for Madame Pualis.
It's definitely impossible for those who come here to smoke meat or bake bread. There's always someone watching them. They won't be allowed to go up to the second floor... Reimund, Ava, and the others are also unlikely suspects. I'll accompany them the entire time. Madame Pualis, Nazélie, and the other ladies have a certain chance. Every time they come, Aurore will keep them in the study to read while she prepares some snacks...
If Madame Pualis is really a Witch, then it's understandable that she needs to hide her identity from the authorities. Also, she is very careful to use other people's livre bleu to avoid being traced back to her...
Did she discover something when she was having an affair with the padre? Did she have to protect herself in this way?
The more he thought about it, the more excited he became. He felt like he was about to lock onto a suspect.
He stood up, paced a few steps, and suddenly walked downstairs.
He didn't want to question Madame Pualis, nor did he plan to pry into her actions now. Instead, he planned to find Reimund or Guillaume-junior and use their livre bleu as a comparison to determine which words had been cut out and what sentence could be formed.
This way, Lumian could recreate the exact content of the request for help.
He rushed down the stairs, through the kitchen, and opened the front door.
The crimson darkness outside rushed in, instantly calming him down.
"Uh, Grande Soeur said that before we figure out the owl's situation, I shouldn't go out after dark..." Lumian muttered. He took two steps back and closed the door.
Anyway, there was no hurry to borrow the livre bleu. It would be more natural to do it tomorrow.
After doing a stretch, Lumian walked towards the staircase.
Ding ding ding ding ding.
The doorbell rang, the sound echoing through the house.
"Who is it?" Lumian turned around in confusion, calling out as he walked towards the door.
A slightly magnetic and gentle female voice sounded from outside.
"It's me, Pualis de Roquefort."

Chapter 18: "Straightforward"

Madame Pualis... Lumian was shocked to see Madame Pualis standing outside his door. He had the illusion that someone had come to his place to silence him, but knowing that his sister was upstairs and had superpowers, he calmed down significantly.

Exhaling slowly, Lumian walked over and opened the door.

There were two women standing outside the door. The one in front was wearing a pure black and exquisite corset dress. She had a shawl of the same color on her shoulders, fishnet gloves on her hands, and a lady's round hat that was slightly slanted.

She was dressed in black, with only a diamond necklace inlaid with gold hanging on her chest.

Her eyebrows were slightly thin, framing her bright, smiling brown eyes. Her long brown hair was tied into a high bun, and her facial features were not outstanding, but when combined, they had a clean and charming beauty. Coupled with her elegant temperament and graceful posture, it made the night at Lumian's door that was dyed a little red seem much fresher because of her. There was also a faint fragrance coming from her.

Madame Pualis, the wife of the Cordu village administrator and the territory's judge, Béost.

Lumian knew he had to add words like "the mistress of the padre", "suspected witch", "help-seeking suspect," and "the fair naked body in the cathedral" in his heart. However, these were not suitable to be said out loud. Otherwise, Madame Pualis would definitely change her expression on the spot.

If he succeeded in angering her, disaster might follow.

"Madame Pualis, what's the matter?" Lumian deliberately looked out at the sky, hinting that it was not appropriate for Madame Pualis to visit at this time.

Madame Pualis's red lips were a little moist as she spoke softly, "I'm here to discuss something with your sister Aurore."

From her appearance alone, she did not look like a woman in her thirties with two children. She was at most in her late twenties.

Lumian deliberated for a moment and made way.

"Aurore is upstairs, writing for her newspaper column," he informed the entering Madame Pualis.

Pualis nodded and said to the lady's maid beside her, "Cathy, wait for me downstairs."

"Yes, Madame." Dressed in a black-and-white lady's maid outfit, Cathy took a few steps towards the warm stove.

Lumian led Madame Pualis through the kitchen and towards the stairs.

Madame Pualis stopped at the corner.
"What's wrong?" Lumian turned around and pretended to be confused.
Madame Pualis asked with a smile, "Did you deliberately bring the three foreigners to the cathedral?"
She's finally here to question me... Lumian didn't panic but instead calmed down.
Lumian's previous experience of pranking and infuriating people had taught him that at such times, he could not directly answer the other party's question, nor could he defend himself. The best choice was to blame the other party for making a certain error!
Of course, this still depended on the situation. Turning around and running was an alternative.
Lumian revealed a furious look as he gazed at Madame Pualis and said, "You guys were actually having an affair in God's cathedral!"
He then spread open his arms and seemingly gestured as though he was "embracing the sun."
"My God, my Father, forgive the sacrilege of this guilty man and woman."
Madame Pualis watched him quietly, the ends of her lips curling beautifully.
"I think God will forgive us. I read a book once that said, 'A lady who shares a bed with her true love is cleansed of all sins, for love legitimizes pleasure, as though from the purest of hearts.' I'm very happy with Guillaume Bénet. Therefore, the Eternal Blazing Sun wouldn't be angry about this. It's not a sin."
What kind of books are you reading, Madame... Lumian couldn't help but inwardly criticize.
"But," Madame Pualis continued, "this is indeed disrespectful to St. Sith."
Every region of Intis had one or two guardian angels or saints, recognized by the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun or the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery's canon, or they had made special contributions in Intis's history. They were well known and respected by the two Churches.
In the Darìège region, the saint in charge of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church was St. Sith. Every Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral here could actually be called Saint Sith Cathedral. However, to differentiate them, only the largest and core cathedral was called that. Others had other names in place.
Therefore, Madame Pualis and the padre having an affair in the cathedral was equivalent to St. Sith's butler secretly bringing someone home and doing the deed in his master's bedroom. It was a great disrespect to the patron saint.

"That's right," Lumian nodded solemnly. "Isn't the padre ashamed?"
Madame Pualis burst into laughter.
After laughing, she said to Lumian, "Back then, I also persuaded him. I said, 'Oh la la, how can we do such a thing in the cathedral of St. Sith?' Guess what the padre said? He said, 'Oh, then St. Sith might have to put up with it a little.'"
Lumian, who was inexperienced in such matters, was momentarily at a loss for words.
"He's blaspheming the saint!" He finally managed to force out this sentence.
Madame Pualis looked like she was reminiscing.
"That's how he is. He's bold and direct, like a bandit who breaks through the door to your soul while swearing curses. He's completely different from the gentlemen in Dariège. Perhaps that's why I slept with him."
"That's just the normal behavior of some men in heat. Not to mention Saint Sith, even if a deity was there, he would make Him wait." Despite his lack of experience, Lumian had read enough novels written by Aurore to know a thing or two about human desire. "This belongs to having his mind controlled by his lower body. No, his head was already empty during that period, filled with another liquid."
Madame Pualis smiled.
"I know that's the reason, but he did appear very charming in that situation. Heh heh, you're indeed an inexperienced young man. Don't you know that the same words will make people feel differently in different environments and moods?
"I remember the first time I had sex with the padre. He stood there, looked me in the eyes, and said to me, 'Pualis, I want to go deeper in understanding your body and mind.' If it were any other time, I would only find him a crude and vulgar pervert. I would have called for help to stop him, but at that time, my body went limp. The mood was just right."
Madame Pualis smiled charmingly.
"It's like, if I had my eye on any man, I'd say to him, 'How does my place tonight sound?'
"If he really comes, I'll bring him straight into the bedroom and tell him, 'I want to make love with you. I love you.'
"Lumian, as a man, how would you answer at a time like this?"
Lumian usually told dirty jokes to the men in the village. Although he was a little uncomfortable, he managed to keep his composure. He tried his best to recall the stories his sister had written and the novels written by other contemporary authors. After some deliberation, he said, "Madame, you are my sunshine."

"Very talented..." Madame Pualis complimented.
As she spoke, she leaned forward, her eyes becoming moist.
A warm breath immediately blasted Lumian's ear, and a slightly magnetic and gentle female voice sounded softly.
"I want to make love with you..."
At that moment, Lumian's heart couldn't help but tremble. His body felt numb, as though he had received an electric shock from touching a broken electrical lamp.
He immediately took a step up the stairs and said to Madame Pualis, "Aurore should be waiting for you."
"Indeed." Madame Pualis straightened her back with a smile on her face.
It was as if nothing had happened.
This woman... Lumian suddenly felt a little afraid of this woman.
He turned around and reached the second floor in a few steps, with Madame Pualis following at a steady pace.
Aurore was already waiting outside the bedroom when she heard the doorbell.
"What took so long?" She looked at Lumian.
Lumian explained vaguely, "We talked about the cathedral."
Aurore understood immediately. She gave her brother a look that said, "Pray for good luck from the Eternal Blazing Sun."
She turned to Madame Pualis, who had just arrived on the second floor, and asked with a smile, "What's the matter?"
"I wanted to talk about the preparations for Lent. I might need your help with a celebration," Madame Pualis said with a smile.
"You caught me at a bad moment..." Aurore found an excuse to decline.
Madame Pualis pointed at the door and said, "How about you hear it first?"
"Alright." Aurore remained polite.
Watching his sister and Madame Pualis enter the study and close the wooden door, Lumian nodded indiscernibly.
Acting normally without showing any trace of returning to the 'crime scene'...
Suddenly, an idea struck him like a bolt of lightning.
There is a high chance that Madame Pualis is a female Warlock. *Can I get supernatural powers from her?*
It would be much more convenient and safer than facing that owl head-on while searching for the truth of the Warlock or exploring the dangerous dream ruins...
After all, I have to unlock the secret as soon as possible to eliminate any hidden dangers. It's less risky once I obtain superpowers.

But Lumian soon became vigilant and shook his head.
He then self-reflected, *How can I think that way?*
I don't even know if Madame Pualis is a friend or foe. *How can I seek supernatural power through her?*
Yes, her actions didn't paint her to be a good person just now. She even made me feel a sense of danger...
What's wrong with me recently? Am I too hasty and rash in pursuing superpowers? It's as if I'll die if I don't obtain them quickly...
It had been nearly two years since Lumian discovered that his sister was a Warlock. Though he had tried to obtain supernatural powers before, he had never worked as hard as he had in the past few days. No matter if the opportunity was good or bad, or if there was danger, as long as there seemed to be hope, he could not wait to come into contact with it. It was as if he was not picky with food after starving for ages.
Phew... Thank goodness I sensed the problem in time. Otherwise, I might end up taking a more deviated and dangerous path. Lumian let out a long sigh, relieved that he had regained his normal state of mind.
But he knew it was impossible to stop pursuing supernatural powers. He just needed choices. After all, the dangerous dream had already revealed itself, and the undercurrents in the village were getting more and more turbulent.

Chapter 19: Meditation

Madame Pualis and Aurore didn't talk for long. Ten minutes later, they walked out of the study.

Lumian walked Madame Pualis out of the door with his sister.

He looked at his sister and asked, "What did she want you to do?"

Aurore pouted and replied, "She wanted me to be the lead singer at the Praise Celebration, but I refused."

Cordu Village's Lent festival had three segments--Spring Elf blessing tour, waterside ritual, Praise Celebration held in the cathedral. The last segment mainly consisted of playing musical instruments and choral singing.

In the DariÃ¨ge region, the lead singer was often from the cathedral choir, but Cordu could only seek out singers who were good at singing as alternatives.

As for musical instruments, the villagers didn't worry about it. In villages with shepherds, music or musical instruments were indispensable in their daily lives.

Shepherds lived in the wild all year round, either in shacks or pits. Other than their companions and sheep, the most common thing they interacted with was the flute they carried with them.

Apart from grazing, playing cards, and chatting, playing the flute and using music to comfort oneself was something almost every shepherd would do.

It was precisely because of this that the phrase used to describe a shepherd in a difficult and impoverished situation was "he doesn't even have a flute."

With so many shepherds around, it was inevitable that the other villagers of Cordu would be affected. When they gathered and chatted in the square, there would always be someone playing an instrument, causing the melodious melody to reverberate.

Lumian was pleased to see his sister being steadfast. "Okay," he said with satisfaction.

Joining in the celebrations was enough. If one wanted to take center stage, it would be a waste of time and could attract unnecessary attention.

In order to protect his eyesight, Lumian read for a while, then decided to wash up and turn in early. He considered how to safely test what was special about him in the dream.

The lady's suggestions had proven accurate several times in a row, making Lumian unconsciously believe her completely.

In the dead of night, Lumian entered the dream again and woke up there.

He checked his pockets and confirmed that the 217 verl d'or and 25

coppet were still there.
Letting out a sigh of relief, Lumian picked up his axe and steel fork and headed downstairs to the stove.
The fire had already been extinguished.
The clock continues spinning when I'm not dreaming... Lumian frowned slightly.
How could there be anything special about him in such a "real" dream?
"The clock continues spinning" was a common saying in the DariÃ¨ge region, meaning that time waited for no man and never stood still.
In the bedroom he deemed safest, Lumian put down his tools and undressed.
He walked to the full-body mirror attached to the wardrobe and checked his body inch by inch to see if there was anything different from reality.
Nothing out of the ordinary.
Mentally special? Lumian wasn't in a hurry to put his clothes on. Instead, he walked back to the bed and sat down cross-legged, like his sister often did when meditating.
Aurore had previously taught him some superficial meditation techniques that did not involve mystical elements to foster lucid dreams. Now, Lumian wanted to try and see if he could sense anything special about his mind and body in the completely quiet scene.
The first step was to regulate his breathing.
Lumian deepened his breathing and slowed down the corresponding frequency.
As he took slow, long, and rhythmic breaths, Lumian slowly emptied his mind.
At the same time, he outlined a red sun in his mind and focused all his attention and thoughts on it to eliminate other messy thoughts.
Aurore had instructed him to choose objects that represented light during meditation, in case he was targeted by vile, evil things.
As a believer in the Eternal Blazing Sun, Lumian's first reaction was to visualize the sun.
Gradually, his mind calmed down, and in his perception, the entire world seemed to have only that red blazing sun left.
Suddenly, Lumian heard something.
It seemed to come from an infinite distance yet was ringing in his ears. The sound was unclear but had inklings of rumbling thunder.
Amidst the indescribable buzzing, Lumian's heart began to race. It

was as if someone had inserted a chisel into his head and stirred it a few times.
An intense pain erupted, and the blazing sun turned as red as blood and quickly dyed black.
The scene in his meditation shattered.
Lumian's eyes snapped open, and he gasped for air. He felt like he was about to die.
After almost twenty seconds, he finally recovered from the near-death experience.
He instinctively lowered his head and examined his body, noticing something strange on the left side of his chest.
A symbol that looked like thorns, black as night, seemed to grow from his heart and extend out of his body, connecting one after another like chains.
Above these thorns were patterns resembling eyes and worm-like distorted lines, all bluish-black.
At this moment, the tattoo-like symbols were slowly fading.
Lumian was first shocked, then had many thoughts.
He quickly got off the bed and went straight to the full-body mirror, aiming his back at it.
Then, he tried his best to turn his head left to check the situation on his back.
He could barely see the chain made of black thorns drilling into his body from his back.
In other words, this chain of thorns sealed his heart and corresponding body in the form of a ring.
Lumian analyzed what was 'special' about him that was unlike reality until the symbols completely faded and disappeared. The black and bluish-black symbols are different, and the bluish-black one looks familiar. Yes, it's very similar to the old man I helped when I was wandering. It was also from that time that I began to have dreams with large amounts of fog.
Lumian found the symbols to be special but meaningless, which left him feeling disappointed.
The process of making them appear was extremely painful, pushing him to the brink of death.
In a state that nearly knocked him out, what was the difference between facing the monster with a shotgun and delivering food to it?
And if he waited until he had the strength to fight again, the 'special' trait would have almost disappeared.
It was cold in the dream, like early spring in the mountains. Lumian found it uncomfortable being naked, so he quickly put on his clothes.

Just doing such a simple thing made him extremely tired, and his head hurt again.
Obviously, he couldn't recover from the impact the meditation had caused him in a short period of time.
Under such circumstances, Lumian decided to give up exploring for the night and not make any attempts. He would sleep well and focus on recuperating.
.....
The sky was still dark when Lumian woke up.
Looking at the darkness in the house and the redness near the curtains, he carefully recalled what had happened in the dream.
I've meditated many times in reality, but I didn't hear that strange sound or feel any pain...
It's something special that only exists in that dream? Lumian sat up in puzzlement, planning to confirm.
He followed the procedure and tried meditating again.
The red sun quickly appeared in his mind, and the chaos in his mind gradually settled down.
This was a familiar meditation experience for Lumian. There were no strange sounds, no intense pain, and no near-death experience.
After a while, he ended his meditation, unbuttoned his shirt, and looked down at his heart.
There was no symbol there.
Indeed, that's the special trait of the dream. It can't affect reality...
Lumian didn't know if he should be happy or disappointed.
He raised his head and looked at the curtain that blocked the windows. His thoughts scattered as he thought about whether the "special" trait in the dream could be exploited, and how.
At that moment, he saw a small shadow outside the window.
Lumian's pupils dilated, turning high-strung as his instinctive reaction was to call out to his sister. But then he remembered that he was at home and Aurore had said she would watch over him, so she should have sensed it.
Slowly and carefully, he approached the window, waiting for his sister to call an end to his actions.
But Aurore did not appear.
Lumian came to the window, grabbed the curtain, and cautiously pulled open a crack.
Outside the window was the quiet and dark night. The crimson moon hung far away in the sky.
On an elm tree not far away, an owl, larger than most of its kind, with eyes that were neither dull nor stiff, stood quietly, facing Lumian's window. It looked at Lumian with an indescribable look of superciliousness.

That owl!
It's here again!
Lumian's heart was in his throat.
Just like the last time, the owl looked at Lumian for about ten seconds before spreading its wings and flying deep into the night.
"..." Lumian was speechless.
After a while, he drew the curtains and cursed, "Is there something wrong with your head?
"You would come and take a look every single time, not saying a word before leaving!
"Are you mute, or is there something wrong with your IQ? Have you not learned human language after so many years?"
In fact, Lumian had his own guesses about the owl's actions. He believed that his sister's existence made it afraid to do anything. After all, Aurore had said that as long as he didn't leave the building at night, she could guarantee his safety. *If he had stuck his head out of the window on impulse just now, the owl probably wouldn't have flown away quietly.*
After cursing for a while, Lumian decided to close the curtains and catch up on some sleep.
He casually glanced outside and suddenly froze.
More than ten meters away, at the edge of a small forest, a figure was slowly walking over.
She wore a dark-colored dress made of coarse cloth, and her hair was thin and pale-white.
"Naroka..." Lumian recognized the figure.
It was Naroka, who he had asked about the legend of the Warlock.
Naroka's face blended into the darkness, and her eyes reflected a strange light under the faint crimson moonlight. Her movements were abnormally stiff, like a wandering ghost.

Chapter 20: Customs

Lumian subconsciously held his breath and shrank back a little.
Naroka did not come in this direction. Slowly, she entered the small forest and disappeared into the deep night.
Lumian was slightly worried. *She doesn't seem right... Did something happen?*
Recently, there had been more and more abnormalities in the village.
He looked outside for a while, and the night had returned to silence. Only the swaying leaves proved the existence of the wind.
"What are you looking at?" Aurore's voice suddenly came from behind him.
Lumian turned around and was delighted to see his sister, who was wearing a two-piece pajama set.
"Did you also notice something wrong?"
"No," Aurore replied, her blond hair slightly messy and fluffy from just waking up.
Then she added angrily, "I don't see anything wrong. All I know is that there's a guy who's up in the middle of the night, loitering at the window."
"It'll be dawn in an hour tops. How can it be considered the middle of the night..." Lumian muttered out of habit. Then he asked, "Didn't you come over because of the owl? Didn't you see Naroka outside?"
"Naroka?" Aurore revealed a rare blank expression.
Lumian recounted everything from the moment he woke up and realized that there was a black shadow outside the window to the strangely-behaving Naroka walking into the forest.
As for the special trait he discovered while meditating in his dream, he planned to consult the mysterious woman first before considering how to tell Aurore or hide it for a while to prevent his sister from stopping him from obtaining superpowers.
Aurore furrowed her beautiful blond brows.
"Something might have already happened to Naroka...
"Go check on them at dawn."
Lumian asked subconsciously, "What could have happened?"
"How would I know? I didn't see her; there's no way I can make an accurate judgment," Aurore snapped back.
"You really didn't see her?" Lumian thought that his sister had been monitoring him the entire time.
Aurore scoffed. "Do you think you can see whatever you want? If you see something you shouldn't, you have to consider which graveyard to bury me in. I won't look outside for no reason. I'll just

monitor your condition. I'll only wake up if something's wrong."
Lumian was stunned for a moment and couldn't help but blink. Grande Soeur is taking such a huge risk to watch over me...
Aurore added earnestly, "That's why I'm telling you, don't look at what you shouldn't see and don't listen to what you shouldn't hear. Pursuing extraordinary power is a very dangerous thing."
"Got it." Lumian nodded solemnly.
At the same time, he thought to himself, It's precisely because it's dangerous that I can't let you go at it alone.
...
After breakfast, Lumian followed his sister's instructions and headed straight to Naroka's house.
As he approached, he saw many villagers standing outside the door, including his friends, Ava's father Guillaume Lizier, Reimund's father Pierre Greg, and the padre's younger brother Pons Bénet.
"What happened?" Lumian carefully circled around Pons Bénet and the few thugs surrounding him and went to Reimund's side.
Reimund replied sadly."Naroka passed away."
"Ah?" Lumian was prepared for something to happen to Naroka, but he didn't expect her to be dead.
Reimund rambled on. "Before dawn, the padre came to give her the last rites. She was still fine and energetic two days ago when we asked her about the legend of the Warlock. Why would she suddenly pass away..."
Before dawn? Lumian was alarmed.
He realized that it was precisely that moment when he saw Naroka. The exact timing of the padre's last rites didn't make much of a difference.
Lumian's mind raced with thoughts. So, what I saw was actually Naroka's ghost? This happened after the owl flew over. *Can it really take away a human's soul?* Yes, Naroka was one of the witnesses to the Warlock incident that happened back then... If I hadn't listened to Grande Soeur and went out after dark, I might have been the one the padre did last rites with. Heh, his version of it for me is probably spitting at me...
Reimund didn't chat with him. He stood outside the two-story house and quietly mourned Naroka.
After Lumian reined in his thoughts, he saw Leah, Ryan, and Valentine walking over.
"Did something happen here?" Leah asked before Lumian could even greet her.
They saw many people gathered on the road.
Lumian sighed and said, "My cabbages, an honorable old lady has

passed away."
"Then why are all of you standing outside?" Leah asked without offering any condolences, not fully convinced by Lumian's explanation.
She was still wearing the same clothes as before.
Lumian made an obvious sizing-up gesture, which made Leah panic.
"What's wrong?" Ryan asked.
Lumian smiled. "You're definitely not DariÃ¨ge locals."
"We're from Bigorre," Ryan answered frankly.
Bigorre was the provincial capital of the Intis Republic's Riston Province, while DariÃ¨ge was a city on the southern border of Riston Province. It covered a large area, including the village of Cordu.
Lumian nodded. "It's no wonder you don't know the customs of the DariÃ¨ge region."
He had initially thought that these three foreigners were officials from DariÃ¨ge, but it turned out that they were from the provincial capital, Bigorre.
Lumian silently updated his judgment of Leah and company. Looks like their status is much higher than I expected...
Leah asked with interest, "What kind of customs? Can you tell us?"
Lumian planned on forging a good relationship with them, so he smiled and said, "You're my cabbages. Why wouldn't I tell you?
"As you know, everyone has their own corresponding horoscope. And in the DariÃ¨ge region, we also believe that every family has their own horoscope that determines the amount of providence they receive. The death and funeral of the family, especially the head of the house, will take away such good providence.
"In order not to affect the horoscope and retain the providence, we will place the deceased in the center of a family before burial, which is the kitchen. Then, we will trim off some of her hair and nails and keep them in the house forever without letting them be discovered by any guests.
"At such a time, if a person attending the funeral enters the house, it will affect the corresponding horoscope and take away a portion of their providence. Therefore, we attend the funeral by mourning outside. At most, we will look in from the door and wait at the cemetery beside the cathedral."
"I see," Ryan nodded in understanding. "It's the same as how every cathedral in every region has holy bones stored. 'The sage is forever where a part of their body is.'"
He turned to face Naroka's house, removed his top hat, placed it against his chest, and began to mourn.

Leah and Valentine also expressed their condolences.
When they were done, Lumian said to them, "I'm going to the door to look at her. I'll see you later, my cabbages."
"Okay," Ryan replied with a gentle nod.
Lumian lowered his voice and added, "I'll help you find that livre bleu."
Before Leah and the others could respond, he stepped to the side and smiled.
"Why do you wear the same clothes every day?"
"We can't care too much about appearances when we are out in a foreign land for extended periods," Ryan explained simply, while Leah subconsciously touched the silver bell hanging from her veil.
After bidding farewell to Valentine and the others, Lumian walked to Naroka's door.
He had to queue for a while before it was finally his turn.
Lumian stood by the door and looked at the kitchen ahead.
Naroka's corpse had not yet been placed into a coffin. It was lying quietly on a simple bed made of a few benches.
Her nails had been trimmed, and her thin white hair was much neater than before.
Her face was pale, and her wrinkles deepened the lines on her face. Lumian didn't dare to look at her for too long.
Compared to when I saw her before dawn, her face is even whiter, Lumian thought to himself as he made a slight bow before leaving the door.
On the way to the cemetery with Reimund, Lumian suddenly slapped his head.
"Sacrebleu, I forgot to inform Aurore."
"What are you waiting for?" Reimund asked, understanding the importance of keeping Aurore in the loop.
Aurore didn't enjoy being out most of the time. She really wasn't kept in the loop if not for her brother.
Lumian saw an opportunity and said, "Coincidentally, this place isn't far from your place. Lend me your livre bleu for two days. A few pages of mine had been gnawed away by rats, so I need to copy it."
"Okay," Reimund agreed.
In any case, there was still some time before the burial.
...
Lumian returned home and hid the livre bleu before informing Aurore about Naroka's passing.
She couldn't help but sigh.
"As expected, something happened. I wonder if it was caused by that owl..."

"I suspect so too," Lumian agreed, echoing his sister.
Aurore tersely acknowledged and said, "You must not leave the house after dark. You have to find a way to warn the people who were seeking out the legend of the Warlock with you."
Lumian had already scared Reimund with Naroka's death, having just asked about the Warlock legend two days ago, and instructed him not to go out after dark for the time being. "Alright," he replied.
"Naroka is a good person. I'll change my clothes and attend her funeral," Aurore said, walking towards the stairs. "Do you want to come with me, or do you want to read some books and do a test set before going?"
Why am I still doing test sets at a time like this? Lumian couldn't quite understand his sister's train of thought.
Considering that he had to compare the livres bleu, he said to Aurore, "I'll do a paper before I go."
"Very good." Aurore was rather pleased.
After Aurore left, Lumian's expression darkened.
He went up to the second floor and entered the study. He took out the livre bleu that he had borrowed from Reimund and compared it to the one at home where part of the words had been cut out.
Time slowly passed as Lumian pieced together the corresponding words one by one and wrote them on a piece of paper.
He made adjustments according to the length of the two sentences, and soon the contents of a possible request for help appeared in front of him: "We need help as soon as possible. The people around us are getting weirder."

Chapter 21: Response

Lumian fell silent, his eyes glued to the restored request for help.

Although what he pieced together wasn't necessarily the content of the letter; after all, the words could create other sentences like 'the people around us need help as soon as possible; we are getting weirder.' He couldn't help but feel a weight pressing down on his heart.

In the past, he might've dismissed it as a prank, but too many abnormal things were happening in Cordu—and those were only the ones he noticed.

I can't pretend that I didn't see anything, nor can I pretend that nothing happened...

Grande Soeur said that a person with a normal heart and mind needs to know how to avoid danger. They shouldn't stand under a wall upon discovering that it's about to collapse...

He snapped out of his reverie and made up his mind.

He couldn't risk staying in Cordu a moment longer. He had to leave with his sister, and he had to do it now!

Regarding the abnormality, the officials would undoubtedly handle it. The villagers of Cordu were under their protection, and Lumian had neither the duty nor the capability to take on such a responsibility.

In addition, I have to speed up the exploration of the dream ruins and strive to obtain superpowers in a short period of time to deal with any accidents that might happen when I leave this place...

The urgency of the situation filled him with a sense of imperative that he couldn't ignore.

He needed to become much stronger if he wanted to protect his sister and ensure her safety. The last thing he wanted was for her to be implicated in any abnormalities that might erupt before they left Cordu.

Keeping his mission in mind, Lumian carefully returned his livre bleu to its original place. Then, he snatched up the piece of paper containing the words and sentences from before and strode purposefully down the stairs.

He made his way over to the stove and tossed the piece of paper into the hungry flames.

Once outside, Lumian wasted no time in making his way straight to Ol' Tavern.

But as he approached the door, he found it tightly shut, a clear indication that the owner and bartender, Maurice Bénet, had likely gone to attend Naroka's funeral.

Still, Lumian knew that as a part-time hotel, it was impossible to

lock all the doors during the day without inconveniencing the guests.
So, he headed for a side trail and slipped in through the back door.
Climbing up the stairs, Lumian scanned the hallway but saw no one in sight.
Thud. Thud. Thud. Lumian's footsteps echoed as he ascended the stairs to the second floor of the inn. He paused outside the door of the enigmatic woman's room, examining the doorknob for any sign of a "Do Not Disturb" placard. Finding none, he inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, steadying himself. With a bend of his finger, he rapped lightly on the door.
Knock! Knock! Knock...
He knocked three times in a row, but there was no movement inside.
Knock. Knock. Knock... No answer. Lumian tried again, rapping more firmly this time.
He pounded on the door, but the room remained silent.
She's not here? Lumian frowned. She went to attend Naroka's funeral?
Without wasting a moment, he bolted down the stairs and out of the inn, making a beeline for the cemetery beside the cathedral.
En route, he passed by Naroka's house, where the mourners who had said their farewells at the door had dispersed and headed to the cemetery to await the procession.
Lumian surveyed the area, his eyes scanning the landscape until he spotted a figure emerging from the house. It was none other than Pons Bénet, the younger brother of the padre.
"Wh..." Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he leaned against the nearby building, trying to remain inconspicuous.
Wasn't it strictly forbidden to enter the house of the deceased as it could potentially influence the family's fortunes?
Pons Bénet stopped in front of Naroka's house and whispered something to Arnault André, the old lady's youngest son.
After a brief exchange, Pons Bénet departed, leaving Arnault to lock up the house and make his way to the cemetery.
Naroka's death is indeed a little peculiar... Lumian frowned and muttered to himself silently.
He now felt that perhaps the owl wasn't to be blamed for Naroka's death. It was more probable that the padre's group has something to do with it.
The owl might be simply adhering to its duty of taking souls from the dead in Cordu. It just happened to stop on the way and observed Lumian for a while.
Of course, Lumian had an even more terrifying guess: What if the

padre's group and the owl are connected!?
Their peculiarities and clandestine activities could be attributed to the Warlock's remains.
Before exiting Cordu, I should find an opportunity to share my thoughts with Ryan, Leah, and company. I hope they'll uncover the truth and put an end to the issue expeditiously. Lumian averted his gaze and mumbled to himself as he headed towards the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.
Despite appearing somber and solemn during the funeral, Lumian kept a watchful eye on each villager, hoping to detect any abnormality in their demeanor.
Alas, his efforts yielded no fruit.
Nonetheless, he had a sneaking suspicion that some of the villagers were wearing a facade...
Additionally, the enigmatic woman who had bestowed upon him the tarot card was nowhere to be found at the cemetery.
.....
As the evening descended upon the semi-subterranean two-story abode, Aurore fixed her eyes on her brother, Lumian, and demanded, "Where's your script? Let me see it."
Lumian's expression turned serious as he replied, "I have something to tell you."
Aurore scanned his face.
"Did some wild animal in the village chew your script again?"
"No," Lumian whispered, his voice low. "I found out something from those foreigners."
Aurore's smile faded as she nodded, gesturing for him to continue.
Lumian revealed how Ryan and his gang were snooping around, investigating a letter, and the peculiarity of the livre bleu at home. He spoke of his suspicions regarding Madame Pualis and the letter's contents, which he had unearthed using Reimund's livre bleu.
Finally, he suggested, "We have to leave the village as soon as possible and head to Dariège. No, Bigorre. We'll stay there for a while."
Aurore didn't respond right away. She mulled over Lumian's suggestion for more than ten seconds.
"This is indeed the best choice for now.
"However, there's a problem. If we suddenly bolt from Cordu while the officials are investigating, won't it draw attention to us? Will they intercept us and make us the focus of their investigation?"
"It's fine if I'm not a Beyonder, but I'm an unofficial Beyonder. I'll be captured and cleansed by the Inquisition."
Lumian was out of his depth, an amateur in a sea of seasoned

veterans. The problem at hand was a conundrum that he had never faced before, and for a moment, he was at a loss for words.
He finally managed to stutter, "So what's the plan? We break out and hide in another city, another country?"
"Oh, Lumian, you are overestimating me," she said. "Those three foreigners are more powerful than you think. If there was only one, I might be able to take them on, but three? And what if there's an ambush outside the village? Maybe they're just waiting for us to make a run for it."
Lumian was speechless.
He had to admit, compared to his sister, he was still green behind the ears. He just didn't have the same level of experience or the sharp attention to detail that she possessed.
"You're too impulsive," Aurore said, shaking her head. "But I suppose that's to be expected. After all, what young man doesn't have a bit of fire in his belly?"
She paused for a moment.
"Tomorrow morning, you're going to do me a favor. Head over to the administrator's office and help me send a telegram to Novel Weekly. Ask them when their next author salon will be held."
Aurore was a beloved columnist for Novel Weekly.
Only the administrator and the padre possessed a telegram machine, reserved for emergency communications. The villagers could use it, but at a cost in verl d'or.
Aurore saw Lumian's confusion and quickly explained her plan, "Novel Weekly has been begging me to promote my work in Trier, but I've always refused, including the most recent author salon. However, if I ask them to invite me now, they'll jump at the chance and even reimburse our train tickets. Our departure will seem ordinary, and even if we're being watched, we won't be suspects. I can temporarily trick them when the time comes. As long as we don't let the abnormality corrupt us, our chances of slipping out of Cordu are high."
Lumian breathed a sigh of relief. "Alright," he said.
In just a few seconds, Lumian posed an intriguing question to Aurore.
"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, is Beyonder a term for people with superpowers?"
"Yes," Aurore replied, choosing not to elaborate any further.
However, Aurore then flashed a sly smile and said, "So, you're really going to abandon your friends and flee from Cordu."
"I must have missed the part where that's my problem," Lumian snorted in response.
Keeping his sister safe was his top priority at the moment.

Aurore clicked her tongue and laughed.
"Oh, Lumian, you're such a delight. Say that again, would you?
"How many times have you said that before? And yet, every time, you either quietly offer your help or give them a pretend warning," Aurore continued.
"Those were trivial matters," Lumian defended himself.
However, the abnormality they faced now was a real threat to his sister's safety.
"Okay, okay," Aurore sighed, not wanting to argue with the kid. "Let's get dinner ready. It's your turn to cook today."
Lumian grunted tersely and headed towards the stove.
.....
The night was dark, the crimson moon obscured by thick clouds.
Lumian finished washing up and lay down on the bed.
A visible worry crept onto his face.
Aurore's response wasn't bad, but Lumian was worried that the anomalies in the village would erupt at any moment while they waited for Novel Weekly's reply.
Lumian was desperate to increase his strength and obtaining superpowers in the dream ruins seemed like the easiest option.
However, he hadn't been able to find that lady all day and didn't have any corresponding suggestions. He was left with no choice but to try it out himself.
The situation was like a nocked arrow, ready to fire, and Lumian couldn't afford to hesitate.
Without hesitation, Lumian composed himself and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 22: Arrangements

Lumian awoke to the world shrouded in a faint, gray fog.

With practiced ease, he bounded out of bed and rushed to the window. His gaze fell upon the mountain, a towering behemoth of brownish-red stones and reddish-brown soil that loomed in the wilderness beyond.

Despite its modest size, a mere twenty or thirty meters tall, the mountain seemed to stretch endlessly upwards, piercing the very heavens themselves. Lumian found himself using the words "mountain peak" to describe it, so profound was its impact on him.

Beneath its massive frame, the ruins of dilapidated structures encircled the desolate wilderness, stacked atop one another, layer upon layer.

Judging by the shotgun-wielding monster's build, I'd say it's highly skilled in both running and jumping. It also appears to possess a degree of intelligence, capable of wielding a weapon as complex as a shotgun...

It has incredibly strong tracking abilities, and I can't discount the possibility that it possesses some sort of superpowers, much like Aurore...

...

As Lumian focused his mind, details of the target began to surface.

His initial judgment was grim--if he attempted to face the monster with the shotgun, his chance of survival was a meager 10 percent. And if he tried to utilize his special trait, it would only hasten his demise. His meditation was a double-edged sword; it pushed him to the brink of death, making him vulnerable to even the slightest strike from the enemy.

Sneak attacks and assassinations were not viable options either. The other party possessed an uncanny ability to track his movements, rendering any attempts at stealth futile. Plus, Lumian lacked the necessary equipment to mount a ranged assault. A revolver would have been a godsend.

For the past two days, Lumian had wracked his brains trying to come up with a plan. And finally, a solution presented itself: traps! He had ventured deep into the mountains with the village hunters, where he mastered the art of setting traps. Since then, Lumian had become a pro at pulling off a few practical jokes.

Lumian's initial plan was to use oil as a weapon. His idea was to fill a large bucket with oil, tie a rope to it, and hide it somewhere high. When his target approached, he would yank the rope, causing the bucket to tip over, drenching the unsuspecting victim with oil. Then, he would light a torch and toss it at them.

However, after some deliberation, he gave up on the idea.
On the premise that the creature had strong tracking abilities, he knew he had to overestimate its sense of smell.
The smell of oil was quite obvious, and if he used other stronger smells to cover it up, he wasn't sure if the other party would react differently. The monster might even be able to distinguish even the slightest abnormality, like wild dogs.
In the end, Lumian chose to dig a deep pit and plant stakes at the bottom.
He knew that there was a certain problem with this plan. With the tracking abilities displayed by the monster, there was a high chance that it would discover the anomaly in advance and see through the trap.
Lumian's response was to find a way to exploit its blind spots and lower its guard.
His weapons were inferior to the creature's, but he hoped his intelligence could give him the upper hand. As a human, he had one advantage: his brain.
At least from our last encounter, it possesses a certain degree of intelligence, albeit not quite that high... Lumian comforted himself.
But he refused to let this lull him into a false sense of security. He would plan assuming that the creature had the cognitive abilities of an average human being.
Someone like Pons Bénet.
No, that guy's IQ is lower than a pile of rocks. If it weren't for all his goons, I'd have him bowing down to me and calling me daddy.
After a moment of contemplation, Lumian raised his expectations of the monster. Yes, treat it like an uneducated padre.
He gazed out the window again, his eyes fixated on the wilderness between his dwelling and the ruins.
This place was closer to the "safe zone," making it the ideal location for his hideout. However, there was no cover, leaving everything exposed in plain sight, making it unsuitable for an ambush.
"It's fine to dig a trap, but if I use myself as bait, the other party will be able to spot me from a distance and shoot me. It won't need to come over at all..." Lumian muttered, contemplating whether to take the risk of entering the ruins to set up a trap.
His plan took shape rapidly, with one thing left to confirm: it would take a lot of time to dig a deep pit and plant stakes below. Lumian couldn't expect the other party to wait until he was done.
After a moment's reflection, Lumian opened his arms and made an "embrace the Sun" gesture. He prayed more fervently than ever

before.
"My God, my Father, please bless me and aid me in dealing with that monster.
"Praise the Sun!"
There was no 100% certainty for most things in the world. Lumian didn't hesitate for a moment. He grabbed the pitchfork and axe from the bedroom and proceeded to the study.
Considering the target's weapon, Lumian knew he had to switch up his protection gear.
He shed his cotton clothes and lashed hard-bound books to his chest and back with a rope.
This was makeshift paper armor!
He vaguely remembered his sister warning him about the potential for internal injuries, but he couldn't afford to worry about that now.
He stretched to make sure the weight of the books wouldn't impede his fighting abilities, then donned his leather jacket and headed down to the ground floor to gather materials for his trap.
Not long after, Lumian's grip tightened on the shovel and bundle of ropes at his waist, one for climbing and the other for crafting rope nets to replace the tree branches.
He breathed deeply, steeling himself for what lay ahead, and gripped the iron axe in his right hand as he opened the door.
A faint gray fog crept through the wilderness as Lumian approached the mountain, the peak now dyed in blood.
Lumian made his way through the eerie silence, creeping towards the edge of the ruins.
With caution, he walked a distance to the side and tossed his shovel, pitchfork, ropes, and other gear into a dark corner of a collapsed building. With only his trusty axe in hand, he returned to the spot where he had entered the ruins.
Moving quietly and deliberately, Lumian crept deeper into the ruins without drawing attention to himself.
When he finally reached the spot where the three-faced monster had scared him off last time, he paused for nearly a minute before turning back.
Halfway there, he began to detour, circling back towards the collapsed house where he had stored his tools.
As he approached, Lumian scanned the terrain, searching for a suitable location to set up his trap.
There's a relatively wide and short crevice here. With a little modification, it'll make an excellent trap and save me precious time. As for the other one, well, that might take a while. But I'll just have to hope the monster won't find me too quickly...

Lumian retrieved his shovel and other gear, turned back to the chosen location, and set to work.
After modifying the crevice, Lumian wielded his axe and sliced off a jagged piece of wood, then inserted it into the trap's base. He crafted a net from rope, draping it over the trap before covering it with soil, ensuring that it blended seamlessly with its surroundings.
With everything in place, he began to mimic the monster tracking him.
If this creature is as perceptive as I think it is, it will sense the trap and avoid it, perhaps leaping over it in a single bound. However, it would inevitably reach this spot...
I need to be here, so it spots me the moment it arrives... Lumian measured the distance with his feet and confirmed his line of sight before settling on a relatively intact wall.
He squatted there and confirmed his line of sight.
Then he began to dig a second trap.
This was a trap specifically designed for "normal humans."
Lumian knew that when someone had managed to track down their target and easily realized that the other party had laid a trap for them, only to discover that the enemy was lying in wait nearby, they'd probably get cocky. Their thirst for success would overwhelm them, and they'd ignore the possibility of a second trap, eagerly lunging at their prey.
It was a classic flaw of people with pedestrian intelligence.
Lumian just prayed that the monster didn't possess the average IQ of a human. If it did, he had no choice but to bolt. Odds were he'd be ensnared and left to die in the wild, with a slim chance of making it back to his house and hiding in the "safe zone."
Cordu's abnormality had forced him to make a dangerous choice.
With every passing moment, Lumian grew increasingly wary. Even though he had set up the second trap, the monster with the shotgun had yet to make an appearance.
The same held true for the other monsters.
At last, Lumian began to relax. After stowing away his shovel and other supplies, he stood tall, spreading his arms wide.
"Praise the Sun!" he exclaimed with renewed vigor.
Lumian shrank back against the wall and fell to his knee, his eyes fixated on the first trap.
There was no clear line of sight to the path he took, obstructed by a collapsed building looming in his way.
He waited there, patiently, his heart thumping in his chest. Lumian could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins, and the sensation was unprecedented.

As a vagrant, Lumian had encountered his fair share of "enemies" who were bigger and brawnier than him. But they weren't looking to off him; they just wanted his grub, dough, and a decent spot to catch some Z's. Even if someone happened to die in the scuffle, it was chalked up to an unfortunate accident.

But now, the adversary he was up against was a monstrous creature that didn't abide by human laws or morals. And it was exponentially stronger than Lumian. Hell, it might even possess a few superpowers. If his scheme went sideways, the outcome was all but certain.

Thump, thump, thump... Lumian's heart was about to leap out of his chest.

Everyone wanted to live the good life, and Lumian was no exception.

Breathe in, breathe out... breathe in, breathe out...

Lumian tried to take deep breaths to steady his nerves, but it wasn't helping.

Lumian hoped the monster would appear sooner, though he dreaded its arrival.

On the one hand, it could bring a quick resolution to this situation, regardless of whether the outcome was positive or negative. At least then he wouldn't be as anxious as he was now, almost at the point of breaking down. On the other hand, fear gripped him tightly.

Realizing that he couldn't go on like this, he reminded himself, I can't burden Aurore with my fears. With that, he attempted to meditate, focusing all his energy on the task.

Although it proved more challenging than before, Lumian eventually managed to outline the crimson sun in his mind.

The mere sight of it eased his nerves somewhat, yet he still trembled with fear.

Suddenly, he heard a faint rustling sound.

It was as if a shepherd was approaching quietly through a nearby pasture, hidden from view.

Chapter 23: Combat Intelligence

Lumian's senses were on high alert.

He wasn't as scared as before now that things were finally happening. Despite his body still quivering, he felt more in control and less likely to collapse.

I should've died five years ago. It's all thanks to Aurore that I'm still alive. These past five years were a free lunch. What's there to be afraid of? Lumian muttered to himself, gritting his teeth and mustering up courage.

In the blink of an eye, the already dim light illuminating the first trap's surface grew even fainter.

A shadowy figure emerged, blocking the light that pierced through the dense fog in the sky.

The figure loomed in the distance, a hulking beast with blood-red eyes and greasy black hair. Half-human and half-beast, it was armed with a shotgun on its back, ready for anything. Its front "knees" bent as it surveyed the ground before it.

A moment later, the beast, wearing a dark jacket and muddy pants, removed its shotgun and jumped, controlling the vertical extent of its jump to leap over the trap and land on the solid, cracked ground.

It turned its greasy black-haired head and saw a slight movement.

Then, the monster spotted Lumian, who had a panicked expression and was trying to hide behind a wall.

With a low growl, the beast jumped up high again and pounced on its target.

It landed a slight distance away from where Lumian had been, to prevent him from turning around and dealing a fatal blow before it could stabilize itself.

Lumian fumbled his way around the wall, disappearing from view.

As soon as the monster landed, the soil beneath its feet gave way, and it plummeted along with the dirt and rope net into a deep pit that had suddenly appeared.

Thud!

The sound of something heavy crashing to the ground echoed through the abandoned building, accompanied by a screech resembling that of a rat.

Lumian, who had concealed himself behind the wall, couldn't suppress the thrill surging through him upon witnessing the sight.

The first step had been accomplished!

With most of his fear evaporating, he seized the pitchfork by his side and dashed towards the trap.

The skinless monster's formidable tenacity had left an indelible

impression on Lumian. Moreover, his quarry had a shotgun, so he refrained from exposing himself above the deep hole. Instead, he aimed the pitchfork from a distance and thrust it into the pit.
In a sudden turn of events, the pitchfork plunged and halted abruptly.
Immediately, an intense force reverberated through the pitchfork, yanking Lumian into the trap with brute force.
Caught off guard, Lumian tumbled forward.
He didn't bother inspecting the pit's bottom. Discarding the pitchfork, he spun around and lunged towards the still-standing wall.
Bang!
The impact hit Lumian like a freight train, knocking him off his feet.
Blood, with a distinct metallic taste, surged up in his throat.
With a thud, he hit the ground, tumbling a few times before he regained his footing.
In the same instant, he caught sight of the monstrous creature—part-human, part-beast—emerging from the deep pit.
It held a single-barreled shotgun in its hand, its body torn open, revealing a grotesque display of wounds. A sickening mixture of dark red and pale yellow liquid poured out, as its insides spilled out.
Despite being badly injured by Lumian's trap, the creature had not lost its ability to fight.
As it tumbled into the pit, it managed to contort its body just enough to avoid a fatal blow. The creature's legs and arms were also still functional, allowing it to break free from the trap.
Without a moment's hesitation, Lumian bolted for the ruins nearby.
It wasn't a spontaneous decision; he had a plan in mind.
He knew there was a chance the trap wouldn't completely incapacitate the monster, leaving it with enough strength to fight back.
In the event that the trap failed, Lumian's contingency plan was to use the environment to his advantage. He'd play a game of cat and mouse, buying time for the beast to succumb to its wounds. Its reaction time and strength would weaken considerably, and Lumian could strike when the opportunity presented itself.
Bang!
Another shot rang out, followed by the sound of soil splattering as leads appeared at the spot where Lumian had been standing.
He quickly took cover behind a half-collapsed wall and crawled on all fours to the other side of the ruins.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of wind blowing in the air.
The monster had jumped over.
Lumian swiftly pivoted and crawled back behind the half-collapsed wall through a gap.
He made the most of the special conditions of the collapsed buildings, hiding at times and circling around at others, dodging the monster's attacks without engaging in a direct fight.
Hide-and-seek was Lumian's forte, honed through past pranks where he used this innate ability to escape getting beaten up on the spot.
As the cat-and-mouse game continued, Lumian gradually found himself panting, while the monster's running speed, jumping height, strength, and reaction speed had clearly weakened.
Just a little longer, just a little longer. I still can't defeat it now...
Lumian retreated back to his previous location, leaning against the half-collapsed wall and trying to control his urge to immediately counterattack.
Bang! Suddenly, he felt a massive blow to his back, sending him flying forward.
The half-collapsed wall and rocks behind him exploded into a million pieces, raining down around him as he crashed to the ground.
The monster hadn't chased after him, instead choosing to body-slam into the obstacles in its way.
The already shaky half-collapsed wall couldn't withstand the brunt of its full force and collapsed completely.
Crimson blood gushed out of the creature's wounds, pooling on the ground in a grotesque display.
Despite being caught off guard, Lumian's reflexes were quick. He rolled out of harm's way and sought cover behind a pile of rubble.
Bang!
The monster's shotgun blast missed him by a hair's breadth.
Having slammed into the wall, the monster struggled to regain its footing.
It fumbled with the cloth bag strapped to its waist, only to find it empty. With a snarl, it hurled the shotgun aside and lunged at Lumian.
Lumian had already darted to a new hiding spot for a continued game of cat-and-mouse.
Of course, he couldn't keep up this game forever. The monster might slip away if he waited too long, and the noise could attract others of its kind.
As he circled around the area, he noticed that the monster seemed to be slowing down.

Here's the chance!
With a quick decision, Lumian pretended to make an escape towards a collapsed building.
Once there, he stood firm, drew his axe from his back, and took a moment to catch his breath.
In a flash, the monster rounded the corner and stood in front of Lumian.
Without hesitation, Lumian raised his axe and charged forward.
He stepped towards the creature, turning his body sideways and lowering his shoulder. He planned to body-slam the monster, a move his sister had taught him, and then slash at its neck.
Bam!
Lumian took a step forward, leaning his body against the monster's chest, but the creature didn't budge. Lumian was surprised by its unyielding stance. He tried to push harder, but the monster remained like a thick wall.
What... Lumian's heart tightened, and he bounced back. He was about to pounce to the ground and try to escape the monster's attack range.
In a flash, the monster lunged forward and clutched Lumian's neck in a death grip.
It didn't look like it was having trouble moving at all!
Lumian gasped in shock as he was hoisted into the air, his neck throbbing with pain. Sacrebleu, I've been tricked! he exclaimed, his mind reeling.
A creaking sound filled the air, and the world spun around him, making his head swim.
His axe had missed its target and was now knocked off to the side.
Lumian finally realized that he had been outsmarted by the monster.
Despite being in dire straits, the creature had enough strength to fight. It had cunningly faked weakness, luring him into attacking instead of staying hidden. Lumian had underestimated its combat intelligence, and now he found himself in a desperate situation.
The monster was clearly at the end of its rope, as evidenced by its inability to snap Lumian's neck. But this was just a temporary respite. The creature still had enough energy left to finish the job.
As his neck threatened to snap and his breathing grew more ragged, Lumian felt his mind begin to go blank.
Blank.
As Lumian teetered on the brink of death, the lady's words suddenly resurfaced in his mind.
She wanted him to use what's special about him in the dream.
Special trait... His thoughts were nearly blank, and so he quickly

seized the opportunity to meditate.
The red sun instantly appeared in his mind. Unlike his previous attempt at meditation to calm his emotions, where the sun disappeared as soon as it was formed, this time he focused on keeping it in existence. Suddenly, a voice from above, infinitely high, pierced his skull.
The pain was excruciating, and Lumian felt as though his heart might burst from his chest. He forgot about the monster's vice grip on his neck and the fact that he was struggling to breathe.
Suddenly, he fell to the ground with a sickening thud.
The strange sound that had accompanied his meditation disappeared, but the pain remained, almost unbearable. He was unable to take stock of his surroundings or even assess the damage done to his body.
After an unknown amount of time, the near-death sensation subsided.
Lumian didn't bother checking his neck; instead, he placed his hands on the ground and lifted his head.
The beast was squatting nearby, half-human and half-beast, with its head drooping and its arms outstretched in front of it.
Lumian noticed its wounds still seeping with blood mixed with a yellow liquid, and the creature's body quivered uncontrollably.
What's wrong with it? Was it scared silly by the "specialness" I displayed? He picked up his fallen axe and took a step towards the monster.
Without hesitation, he held the axe with both hands and swung it at the back of the beast's neck.
The axe sank deeply into the creature's muscles and came to a halt at its bones.
Lumian used all his strength to remove the axe, then continued his assault, slashing at the monster's neck once, twice, thrice. Finally, the beast's head detached from its body with a sickening splash, rolling to the side.
The body held on for a moment longer, barely clinging to life.
No resistance, just trembles.
And then, with a sudden jerk, Lumian's body contorted, his hands releasing their tight grip, letting the bloodied axe slide down with a sickening squelch.
Huff. Puff. Huff. He could finally catch his breath.

Chapter 24: Gains

Lumian didn't have the luxury of resting for too long. He had to keep moving, for fear that other monsters might come. After taking a moment to catch his breath, he endured the pain in his neck and back and slowly approached the monster's corpse.

He held the axe tightly in his right hand, ready to strike again if the creature wasn't fully dead.

After cautiously searching the body with his left hand, he found three copper coins called "lick" and an empty cloth bag.

"That's it?" Lumian muttered to himself, disappointed that he hadn't found anything related to superpowers.

If it wasn't for that, would he have risked his life fighting this monster?

If Lumian wasn't special in the dream, he would have been nothing more than the monster's meal.

He propped himself up and looked towards the shotgun monster's head that had rolled to the side, praying that what he was searching for was there.

In that moment, a deep crimson glow materialized over the monster's body.

They resembled fireflies, gradually converging towards a single spot in an unyielding fashion.

Lumian gawked in disbelief, as a sense of elation began to well up inside of him.

This phenomenon had to be connected to superpowers!

Without much delay, a sticky, dark red substance materialized on the monster's chest, and no additional light specks came into view.

Lumian cautiously crouched down and made a grab for the blob.

It was incredibly slippery, slipping through his grasp twice before he finally managed to hold it in his palm.

It's remarkably lightweight, yet possesses a certain texture and elasticity. The surface feels as smooth as glass...

"What the hell is this?" Lumian muttered to himself, realizing once more that he was completely illiterate when it came to matters of the mystical.

In the midst of hushed whispers, Lumian caught a whiff of something strange and dark-red that reeked of blood. His impatience grew, and an indescribable malice took over his body.

For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to raise his axe and hack at the monster's corpse until his violent emotions were spent.

But Aurore's warning about the dangers of pursuing superpowers echoed in his mind, and he quickly reined in his impulses. He had

taken precautions to monitor himself and remain vigilant at all times, and he wouldn't let his guard down now.
It affects my mind? Lumian tossed the dark red blob into the cloth bag he had found on the monster.
The moment he lost contact with it, he felt a wave of calm wash over him, dissipating the remaining excitement of the deathmatch.
His body still trembled slightly, but he was back in control.
"As expected!" Lumian whispered happily as he returned to his senses.
He tied the cloth bag tightly and secured it to his belt buckle.
After a moment's consideration, Lumian withdrew the cloth bag and stowed it safely in the inner pocket of his leather jacket.
It provided him a sense of assurance and minimized the chances of losing it!
As the buttons on his clothes were undone, the book that had been plastered to Lumian's back lost its support and hit the ground.
It was riddled with potholes and in tatters, a far cry from its former state.
Lumian recognized it as the "Mock Examination Papers for Higher Education Admission" exercise book that his sister Aurore had prepared for him. This was the same book that had saved his life by blocking a shotgun attack.
Of course, this single book didn't deserve all the credit.
Lumian picked up the exercise book and sauntered back to the monster's lifeless body, a wry smile on his face.
"See, knowledge is indeed power!" he said, intending to throw it at the monster's face. But then he hesitated, recalling the countless hours Aurore had spent writing it. He couldn't bring himself to toss it away.
Instead, he tucked the exercise book into his belt, dragged the monster's corpse to the trap, and flung it inside. Lumian kicked the monster's head for good measure.
With the battlefield cleared, Lumian gathered his tools, including the empty shotgun, his pitchfork, and shovel, and retreated into the wilderness.
He looked over his shoulder as he walked, ever-vigilant.
Eventually, he made it back to his house, climbed the stairs, and entered his bedroom.
It was only then that he truly relaxed. The agony that had been gnawing at his body, the obvious discomfort, and the overwhelming exhaustion all erupted at once.
He slumped down on the bed, taking a moment to recover. But he didn't want to sleep just yet. He needed to assess the damage.

Lumian stripped off his clothes and walked over to the wardrobe, checking himself out in the full-body mirror.
His neck was swollen, and the five bloody finger marks on it had turned an ominous shade of bluish-black. His back was bruised, and there were countless scrapes and cuts all over his body.
Even some of my injuries are internal, just like Aurore had warned me. I wonder if I'll recover by the next time I come in? He couldn't help but reflect on the battle. It was a failure, but not a total failure.
In the first half of the battle, he gave himself a pat on the back. Not only did he make full use of the monster's low IQ to lead it into the second trap, but he also followed his original plan to a tee. It was a game of cat and mouse, and he played it to perfection. He dragged the monster out until it was on the brink of surrendering to its injuries. However, his lack of experience was his downfall. Instead of throwing in heavy rocks, he chose to stab the monster with a pitchfork at the bottom of the pit.
In the second half of the battle, he was overconfident and underestimated the monster's intelligence. His insufficient combat experience made him fall into the monster's trap, which almost got him killed.
That performance would have been a disaster. Thankfully, his earlier successes had pushed the monster to its limit, and it didn't kill him quickly enough. This gave him a chance to complete his meditation and summon his "special trait".
Before this battle, Lumian had not expected the "special trait" to have such a powerful effect. It caused the monster to descend into uncontrollable fear, one so unbreakable despite suffering attacks.
He had worried that the near-death state brought about by summoning the "special trait" would make him vulnerable to attack.
But it turned out to be special and very strong... As Lumian sighed, he had a revelation.
The monsters in the ruins avoided his house and made it a "safe zone" because there was something even more terrifying inside. It could be the owner of the mysterious voice he heard when he summoned the "special trait"!
Lumian gasped at the thought.
His subconscious urged him to search every corner of the house for the terrifying thing, but he quickly dismissed the idea.
Provoking the being that even the shotgun-wielding monster was helpless against was not an option.
For now, all was calm and peaceful, and it was best to keep it that way. He had to maintain the current state of the "safe house" and

not uncover the shroud.
Each passing day was a day, and as for the dangers that may lie ahead, he would face them when the time came.
Not until then, not until I become a Beyonder and gain significant power. Lumian cast his gaze at the cloth bag in his left hand.
Even as Lumian examined his injuries in the mirror, shirtless, he refused to let go of the source of superpowers. He had worked too hard to obtain it.
How should I use this thing? he asked himself, opening the cloth bag and staring at the dark red blob within.
The blob lay still at the bottom of the bag, its form unstable yet clearly not alive.
Lumian, who knew nothing of mysticism, wondered if he should eat it, perform a ritual to merge with it, or offer it to some secret entity.
He only knew of the latter two options from reading Hidden Veil. In the past, he would have only thought of one thing: "Eat!"
Lumian didn't rush to make a decision. He intended to seek counsel from the enigmatic lady at Ol' Tavern first.
He was convinced that the woman would provide him with clues on how to harness the power of the dark red sphere and gain superhuman abilities.
Lumian sensed that the other party had a reason for doing so, despite not knowing what it was.
If things didn't pan out, he could still count on his sister for help.
After dressing leisurely, Lumian stowed the lump of crimson in his coat pocket, along with all the cash he'd acquired.
Finally, he collapsed onto the bed, too drained to move. Despite the agony in his neck, back, and body, overwhelming fatigue seized him, and he drifted off to sleep in a flash.
.....
As Lumian opened his eyes, he was blinded by the sunlight that had already penetrated the curtains, illuminating the entire room.
Slowly sitting up, he felt sore all over, as if he had been pummeled in a dream.
I was indeed beaten up badly... The injuries in the dream really get reflected into reality, but there's an obvious level of weakening... Trying to move around, he felt his muscles aching a little but was ultimately relieved that he wasn't too affected.
However, when he reached into his pockets--
"Nothing... Nothing at all!" Lumian failed to exit with the crimson blob.
His expression became solemn, his brows knitted tightly. Lumian didn't know what to do.

The crimson blob, an item that promised superpowers, hadn't followed him into reality. This was different from what the mysterious woman at Ol' Tavern had said.
Lumian gathered himself, quickly changed his clothes, and left his room.
As he walked down the hall, he noticed that the door to the washroom was wide open. Aurore was facing the mirror, brushing her teeth with a serious look on her face.
"Morning," Lumian greeted.
"It's not early anymore. You got up late..." Aurore muttered incoherently.
Splat! Her blond hair, tied back into a ponytail, flicked about as she spit out the liquid in her mouth.
She turned to look at Lumian.
"What did you do wrong last night?"
"That owl is outside. How would I dare go out?" Lumian responded calmly.
"That's true." Aurore dropped the topic and said, "Remember to take five verl d'or to the administrator to send a telegram later."
Lumian nodded.
This was the key to their escape from Cordu, and it was something he would never forget.
After breakfast, Lumian headed straight to the village square where the administrator's office was located in a two-story building.
Upon reaching the office, Lumian discovered that Administrator Béost had yet to arrive, but the rest of the staff had already commenced their day's work.
Lumian paid the required fee and promptly sent a telegram. After concluding his business, Lumian turned on his heel and began walking towards the Ol' Tavern.
It was highly unlikely that the enigmatic woman was already up and about, but Lumian was more than happy to bide his time.
His pursuit of superpowers had been a prolonged one, so a few more ticks on the clock didn't faze him.

Chapter 25: Sequences and Potions

Lumian sauntered into Ol' Tavern, his sharp eyes scanning the dimly lit room. To his surprise, the mysterious woman was already seated in her usual corner, enjoying a lavish breakfast spread.

She had changed her attire yet again, donning a long brown, pleated dress and a dark velvet hat that screamed high society.

"So early?" Lumian approached her table, calming his racing heart.

The woman looked up, meeting his gaze.

"Is there a possibility that I didn't sleep all night?"

"Perhaps." Lumian knew this routine all too well--his sister, Aurore, often pulled all-nighters when deadlines were looming. *But what was the reason for the enigmatic woman raising this up?*

As he glanced at her table, he found a delectable spread, with a cream soufflé sprinkled with nuts, a muffin that looked scrumptious, a croissant, a cup of black coffee, and a cat tongue biscuit.

What an appetite! Lumian thought, impressed. *But how can Cordu provide such luxurious cuisine?* Only Aurore or the chefs in the administrator's family could whip up something like this.

"It's all dessert," Lumian said, taking a seat opposite her.

The woman nodded, her expression serious for once.

"Intis's desserts are indeed not bad, and there's quite a lot of variety. Even if I have some for breakfast every day, it'll take me a month without repetition to finish them all," she said, biting into the cat tongue biscuit and closing her eyes in bliss. "That's one of the purposes of traveling."

Lumian seized the moment to probe the woman's background. "You're not from Intis?" he asked.

The woman smiled enigmatically.

"I'm from Loen, but given the current situation, this isn't important."

What else did Loen have to offer besides steam machinery, factories, and a large army? Lumian, being an Intisian, couldn't help but recall the mocking words that everyone used to taunt the Loen Kingdom--reclining chairs, mint sauce, fried fish and potatoes, and pure snakefruit beer.

But he quickly brushed off the thought and turned his attention to the task at hand.

"I got rid of the monster with the shotgun."

The woman took a sip of coffee and nodded approvingly.

"Not bad."

Lumian sensed a strange emotion emanating from her eyes.

He couldn't shake off the strange feeling that he had sensed in their previous interactions. There was something about her that he couldn't quite put his finger on--a mix of facetiousness and hidden emotions that intrigued him.
Undeterred, he pressed on with the matter at hand.
"I obtained an abnormal dark-red object from that monster. Holding it makes me irritable and filled with hostility.
"I think it involves supernatural powers, but it didn't follow me to reality," he explained.
The woman smiled enigmatically.
"After going in and out so many times, don't you realize that other than your own physical condition, you can't bring anything else over?"
Lumian was taken aback. "Didn't you say that supernatural things are excluded..." he trailed off, realizing that he was out of his depth.
Lumian couldn't shake off the physical discomfort that lingered from his dream, along with the vivid memories that refused to fade away.
After careful consideration, he posed a question.
"You mean that after obtaining supernatural powers through the crimson blob and turning oneself into a Beyonder, the corresponding state that is different from that of a normal person can be brought to reality?"
"Not a lost cause," she replied nonchalantly, savoring the cream soufflé.
"But won't the corresponding strength weaken because of this?" Lumian pressed, his brow furrowing. "The injuries I suffered in the dream are much lighter in reality."
"The conditions brought about by Beyonder characteristics won't change," the woman explained, meeting Lumian's gaze. "This is why I said that extraordinary items are excluded."
Beyonder characteristics... Lumian mulled over the term, trying to piece together what his sister had told him about Beyonders.
Obtaining such characteristics would allow one to become a Beyonder, he surmised.
And based on the woman's explanation, he had a hunch about the unique nature of his dream.
That ruin, it's real. Or maybe it was once real, but now it's sunk deep into some big shot's dream and been left to fester. And my dream, it's like a secret passageway. A passageway that's only accessible through the symbols on my chest, and leads straight to that ruin.
Based on my theory, my home in the dream is like a mark left

behind by our interaction. It's a reflection of the place where I feel safest, deep in my subconscious. That's why it looks nothing like the wilderness or the ruins that surround it. It's like we're in two different worlds, me and the monsters.
But those monsters, they can't come in. They're stuck in the real ruins while my "home" is a mix of dream and reality. Only those with the special symbols can pass through the corresponding barrier.
The symbols only work for me, and they record the state of my body before I'm brought back to reality. When I wake up, the things that don't involve the supernatural will fade away, but the implications will remain. Even death will work the same way.
So there shouldn't be anything scary waiting for me at home in the dream. But the origin of those symbols and the source of that terrifying voice, they symbolize something dark and horrific...
Lumian sat in silence, watching the lady across from him leisurely devour her breakfast. She didn't seem to mind.
Lumian finally asked, regaining his composure, "May I ask how I should use that dark-red blob? Is it the Beyonder characteristic you mentioned?"
At the critical moment, he could not help but address her respectfully.
The lady set down her coffee and looked at him.
"I can give you a potion formula. Just follow it."
The generous gift made Lumian uneasy.
"Why are you helping me?"
The lady laughed.
"Would you believe me if I said it was arranged by fate?"
No... Lumian subconsciously replied inwardly.
The abnormality in the village, the pressure of the impending storm, and the desire for superpowers all swirled around Lumian, threatening to overwhelm him. He pushed his unease down and spoke in a low voice, "I do."
Opportunities like this didn't come around often, and Lumian knew he had to act decisively. He couldn't afford to hesitate or have second thoughts.
The lady's smile grew wider, the unclear emotions he had detected in her eyes earlier intensifying.
She pulled out a stack of post-it notes and a silver fountain pen from her black lady's purse and began writing.
Finally, she stopped and tore off the top note and handed it to him.
Lumian snatched it from her hand and read it quickly.
"Hunter potion formula:
"Main ingredient: One Hunter Beyonder characteristic;

"Supplementary ingredients: 80 milliliters of red wine, one Red Chestnut Flower (can be a specimen or substituted with 10 drops of the corresponding essential oil), 5 grams of poplar tree leaf powder, 10 grams of basil;
"Usage: Drink it directly.
Satisfied with his memorization, Lumian carefully folded the note and slipped it into his brown jacket.
Done with that, he asked, unable to contain his curiosity, "What does 'Hunter' mean?"
Hunter in the supernatural sense?
"The corresponding Sequence," the lady replied, taking a casual sip of her coffee. "You do not know much about mysticism, so let me explain. There are 22 common pathways in the world. To access them, you must obtain ingredients with the corresponding Beyonder characteristics and concoct potions. Each pathway has 10 Sequences, numbered from 9 to 0. The lower the number, the higher the level, and the stronger the ability."
"The Beyonder characteristic you obtained belongs to the Red Priest pathway. It can only be used to concoct the corresponding Sequence 9 Hunter potion."
Lumian listened attentively and blurted out, "Then what Sequence does my sister Aurore belong to?"
"She's a Sequence 7 Warlock of The Hermit pathway," the lady replied coolly.
She did not mention how she knew.
Aurore is already at Sequence 7? That's true. She has already obtained supernatural powers for several years... I'll only be at Sequence 9 after consuming the potion. I'm still quite a distance from her... I only hope that I won't be a burden when we escape Cordu in the future... Lumian couldn't help but ask, "Can I drink higher Sequence Beyonder potions directly? Or should I drink Sequence 9 today and Sequence 8 tomorrow?"
"Theoretically, yes." The lady added after Lumian revealed a look of joy, "However, most who attempt it end up dead or as a monster. Fewer than one in ten million people succeed."
"Turn into monsters?" Lumian was alarmed.
The lady chuckled and said, "Didn't your sister warn you about the dangers of the path to transcendence? After drinking the potion, if you can't control the power, you'll either die from a physical breakdown or transform into a monster. Why do you think the one you encountered was in human form?"
No wonder... Lumian finally understood what danger his sister was talking about.
But he was willing to face it.

"Is there no way to reduce this danger?" he asked.
The lady considered him for a moment before answering, "There is. You need a firm will, good physical condition, and some luck. As for the rest, you don't need to know. You're still on the first potion."
"Good physical condition..." Lumian, who had planned on returning to catch up on sleep and drink the potion later, frowned.
He was still seriously injured in the dream.
The lady opposite him nodded slightly and said, "Take your time. Wait until nightfall and your body has mostly recovered before diving back into your dreams."
"Uh..." Lumian's mind raced with questions. "So as long as my body in reality is almost healed, the injuries in my dream will completely recover?"
One had to know that his body in reality was only a little sore. It was completely different from the injuries in the dream!
"Yes." The lady confirmed Lumian's guess.
She continued, "There's much to learn about the potion and the paths of the divine. I'll tell you once you become a Hunter."
The paths of the divine... Lumian asked in puzzlement, "Why not tell me now?"
The lady laughed.
"If you die or become a monster, it would be a waste of my time to say so much now."
"..." Lumian was speechless.
Lumian stood up and excused himself, but before he left, he asked one more thing.
"Do you know about the anomaly in the village?"

Chapter 26: Whistleblowing

The lady nibbled on a croissant before answering Lumian's question.

"I do."

She really knows... Lumian's heart leapt with hope. He deliberated over his words before asking, using honorifics to show his respect, "May I offer to pay a certain price to commission your help in solving Cordu's problem?"

From his point of view, this mysterious lady woman was much stronger than Leah and her companions. If she agreed to help, the problem with Cordu would be solved, and he and his sister wouldn't have to risk their lives to escape. But he was worried that he couldn't afford the price.

Lumian wasn't optimistic that the woman would agree to help. But he felt it was necessary to try. Even if he was rejected, he wouldn't be too embarrassed. He was not a stickler for such things.

The woman turned to him and spoke calmly, "I can indeed solve the problem here, but the corresponding price is that everything will be destroyed, including you.

"If you want a better outcome, you can only rely on yourselves."

Lumian's eyes widened in disbelief. *Could the problem with Cordu be that serious?* He searched the woman's face for any sign of jest, but found none.

He wasn't surprised or disappointed that she refused to help. What shocked him was the severity of the problem. It could even lead to the destruction of the entire village!

He was puzzled and alarmed by the situation. *Since she can resolve it, why is it that the entire village will die, while us ordinary people and Beyonders who aren't strong enough capable of producing a better outcome?*

If he didn't hear back from Novel Weekly by the day after tomorrow, he would urge his sister to leave Cordu immediately. He couldn't delay any longer even if it meant taking a huge risk! He had to act fast!

"What's the problem?" Lumian pressed, his dignity never a priority.

The lady smiled.

"Me telling you and you finding out through your investigations will give rise to completely different results."

Lumian gritted his teeth instinctively. He didn't stand her behavior of always holding back something.

For some reason, he sensed that peculiar feeling in the woman's eyes, something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Okay." Lumian paused for a moment, weighing his words

carefully. "Do you have any information about Madame Pualis? Is she a Warlock—uh, a Beyonder?"
The woman lifted her coffee cup to her lips and took a small sip before answering, "Yes, she is."
Indeed... Lumian asked further, "What pathway, which Sequence?"
The lady's expression turned serious in an instant.
"It's not a normal pathway."
"What do you mean it's not a normal pathway?" he pressed.
The lady smiled.
"You'll find out later."
I want to know now... Lumian struggled to keep his expression in check.
Already standing and about to leave, Lumian suddenly remembered something crucial.
"Madame, how am I supposed to bring those supplementary ingredients into the dream?"
In the dream ruins, he could only find basic ingredients like red wine and basil in the dream ruins, but for the Red Chestnut Flower and poplar leaf, he would have to collect them in reality.
The task wasn't impossible, and Lumian had already thought of a way to "borrow" them, but he knew it would all be for naught if he couldn't transfer them to his dream.
The lady smiled and said, "I'll offer you a little assistance again, free of charge.
"Find those materials in reality, put them on the table in your bedroom before you sleep. I'll help you send them into your dream."
She can send those things into my dream? Lumian was first shocked before feeling a wave of relief wash over him. At least his problem was solved.
He never thought he'd encounter someone else with the ability to "enter" the special dream world like he could.
Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that his ability to enter dream ruins had something to do with the cryptic symbols etched onto his chest. As he gazed at the woman before him, he couldn't help but wonder if she was connected to those same markings or that bizarre and terrifying voice that had been echoing in his mind.
Lumian had just left the Ol' Tavern and had plans to collect the Red Chestnut Flower and poplar leaves.
But as he turned the corner, he saw Ryan, Leah, and Valentine exiting the back door of the tavern. They were still dressed in the same clothes and outfits.
Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he greeted them with a smile.
"Good morning, my cabbages."

Leah turned her head and laughed amidst the tinkling sounds.
"You're early, too."
Lumian tried to act sneaky and looked around before speaking in a hushed tone.
"I noticed something unusual yesterday."
Ryan's expression turned serious as he exchanged glances with Valentine and Leah.
"What is it?"
Lumian's voice quivered slightly as he spoke.
"I suspect that Naroka's death is abnormal. You attended her funeral yesterday."
Ryan gave Lumian an encouraging look to continue, and Lumian took a deep breath before proceeding with his suspicions.
"I told you about the funeral customs in the Darième area, didn't I? After everyone went to the cemetery, Pons Bénet entered Naroka's house without any objection from the owner.
"Isn't this destroying the influence of their family's horoscope and taking away the corresponding good luck?
"There must be something wrong!"
"Pons Bénet, the brother of the padre?" Ryan thought for a few seconds and asked.
Lumian nodded heavily.
As Lumian thought about the padre's strange group and his impending departure from Cordu, he realized he had nothing to fear from speaking his mind. With a deep breath, he declared, "The padre is not a good man!"
"Why do you say that?" Leah asked with a grin, clearly unsurprised by Lumian's criticism of the padre.
Not one for formalities, Lumian launched into a detailed account of a villager who had snitched in Darième and subsequently vanished. His focus was on the accusations against the padre, and he held nothing back.
Finally, he said, "I really question how he's a clergyman of the Church.
"One time, I said something that was deemed too real, and I had to hide temporarily in the cathedral.
"I was about to doze off behind the altar when the padre walked in with Madame Pualis. And let me tell you, they were doing the dirty deed right under the deity's gaze.
"In the conversation that followed the deed, the padre even lamented to Madame Pualis, saying, 'Why can't a man marry his sister?'
"Madame Pualis was appalled by his words and begged the padre to repent.

"However, the padre said, 'Many wealthy families lose their fortunes when their daughters marry and their sons start families. But if a son could marry his sister, these problems would disappear. Unfortunately, the law and morals don't allow it'..."
The frigid Valentine's face contorted with anger at the news.
"Is he a servant of God or a servant of the Demon?"
Ryan nodded as if in thought.
"No wonder Pons Bénet hasn't been able to start a family despite being married after all these years..."
Leah surveyed Lumian as she chuckled.
"You knew about Madame Pualis and the padre's affair. You wanted to use us that day."
Lumian's smile was uneasy, but his tone was resolute.
"As a believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun, I cannot tolerate such a person in the cathedral."
The cold Valentine's expression softened, and he nodded approvingly.
"If only Cordu had more people like you."
A few more like me? Lumian shuddered at the thought of Cordu overrun with more people like him.
He continued, "That time, I overheard the padre warning Madame Pualis that he was planning something and might be targeted by the Inquisition. He told her to be careful and keep quiet."
Ryan's expression turned solemn.
"Did he say anything more about it?"
"No." Lumian didn't fabricate the matter.
He couldn't risk saying more than that. If he did, trouble could erupt tonight. He wasn't even a Beyonder yet.
After bidding farewell to the trio of foreigners, Lumian spent hours gathering Red Chestnut Flowers and poplar leaves.
As the sun neared its apex, Lumian arrived at the village square and made his way to the two-story building where official business was conducted.
Most of the villagers had already gathered, eagerly awaiting the selection of the Spring Elf, an important part of the upcoming Lenten celebration tomorrow.
Squeezing through the crowd, Lumian spotted Reimund, Ava, and the others.
"Is Ava on the list?" he asked.
Ava remained silent, her agitation palpable. Reimund shook his head. "We don't know."
"She must be on it," interjected Guillaume Berry, a frequent companion of Lumian and the others. "Among the unmarried women in the village, other than your sister, she's the most

beautiful. Your sister doesn't meet the age requirements."
He was the Guillaume-junior that Lumian and the others were talking about. He hung out with them frequently. Guillaume had curly brown hair and prominent freckles on his face. His blue eyes seemed to narrow because they weren't large enough.
Ava's cousin, Azéma, also stood nearby, looking much like Ava but smaller and less striking.
She remained silent, but Lumian sensed her desire to be chosen as the Spring Elf as well.
In the Dariège area, being chosen as the "Spring Elf" was a coveted honor that not only recognized a person's beauty and character but also came with hidden benefits.
Upon hearing Guillaume-junior's words, Lumian grinned.
"If Ava's not on the list, I'll shout, 'I vote Ava!' when the administrator finishes reading it."
Ava blushed. "You don't have to do that."
It was a normal process for villagers to shout out additional candidates after the administrator finished reading the list of nominees for the Spring Elf. However, not many had the nerve to do so. Lumian, however, was not one to shy away from such things.
He had no misgivings about this.
Ava will be the one being embarrassed, not me.
Shortly after, Administrator Béost appeared at a second-story window, looking far more put-together than the padre. His neatly combed brown hair, light blue eyes with black lines, straight nose bridge, thin lips, and well-groomed mustache conveyed his status, accentuated by his double-breasted flannel coat.
He gazed down at the assembled villagers for a moment before speaking.
"Ladies and gentlemen, it's time. Those who are late will no longer have the right to vote.
"Next, I'll read the list of candidates for the Spring Elf."
"Ava Lizier..."
As Béost read out the list, Ava breathed a sigh of relief.
Unsurprisingly, she received over 80% of the votes.
After the voting, Lumian made an excuse about needing to go home and left without celebrating with his companions.
Upon arriving home, he immediately asked his sister, "Did we receive a reply?"
If they had, the telegrapher would have delivered it and collected a fee.
"Not yet," Aurore replied, shaking her head.
She then said, "The undercurrents have been turbulent lately. You

can't let your guard down during combat practice. Speaking of which, we'll spar in the afternoon."
Lumian winced, feeling sore all over.
But then an idea struck him. He put on a pained expression and said, "I don't know if it's because I've been training too hard, but my whole body hurts today. Aurore, uh, sister, can you give me a massage? You're the most skilled at it."
Aurore nodded. "Sure, I can do that."
.....
Under the skilled hands of his sister, Lumian's body finally began to recover that night.
Before drifting off to sleep, Lumian placed three Red Chestnut Flowers and some powdered poplar leaves in a bottle on the table in front of the window.
He gazed at the bottle for a long moment, his heart beating with anticipation and nervousness, before finally crawling under the covers.

Chapter 27: Five Changes

As Lumian awoke in the gray fog, his first instinct was not to check his physical condition. Instead, he sat up abruptly and looked at the table by the window.

There, bathed in the soft light that filtered through the thick fog, were the three Red Chestnut Flowers and the glass bottle of poplar leaf powder.

She really sent the supplementary ingredients in... Relief flooded Lumian. He got out of bed and stretched, delighted to discover that the pain in his neck and back had vanished, along with the general discomfort he had been feeling.

Just as I hoped, I'm fine in the dream when I'm better in reality even though the injuries on both sides aren't equal at all... He quickly walked over to the wardrobe with the full-length mirror, took off his shirt, and examined himself.

The five bloody finger marks, the bruises, and the blood clots were all gone.

This made Lumian wonder if killing the Beyonder monster had been nothing more than a dream.

Thankfully, the crimson object in the cloth bag, the slightly larger sum of money, and the shotgun next to his bed confirmed the reality of his experience.

Lumian's heart eased. With the cloth bag containing the crimson item and a large amount of money, he left the bedroom and went straight to the first floor. Grabbing a bottle of red wine and a beer mug, he headed back up with some basil.

He made sure to bring along a measuring cylinder and miniature scale that his sister Aurore had purchased for him.

Looking at the desk filled with all the necessary items, Lumian felt both excited and nervous.

With everything in place, all that remained was to concoct the potion!

Potions were not beverages. They were more dangerous than alcohol, capable of killing or transforming the drinker into a monster with the slightest mistake.

Lumian took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, his hands steady as he used the measuring cylinder to pour 80 milliliters of red wine into the beer mug.

Next, he added 10 grams of basil, 5 grams of poplar leaf powder, and a single Red Chestnut Flower.

The process proceeded without incident. The red liquid in the mug had a few more dregs and a floating flower, but otherwise looked unremarkable.

With the cloth bag of crimson substance at his side, Lumian watched intently as the object slid into the beer mug.
Without a sound, the dark-red blob seemed to dissolve rapidly, drawing in the surrounding liquid in the process.
Bubbles erupted, and the entire mug turned a deep shade of red. The Red Chestnut Flower had dissolved completely.
This is the Hunter potion? Lumian gulped and picked up his beer mug.
The supernatural power he had sought for so long was finally within his grasp.
Without hesitation, he took a deep breath and steeled himself for what was to come. Raising the mug to his lips, he drank the potion in one swift gulp.
The pungent odor of blood filled his nostrils, and he started hearing things.
As he set the mug down, a searing pain ripped through his body, so intense that Lumian wondered if he had swallowed a ball of fire. The flames seemed to burn through his esophagus, stomach, heart, lungs, intestines, and blood vessels all at once.
At the same time, a strong scent of blood wafted up from his throat.
Lumian fought to remain conscious, remembering the lady's warning that fainting would mean defeat. He knew the stakes were high, and the outcome was obvious if he failed.
His head swam as he lowered it, gazing at the bright red veins protruding from the back of his hand.
The pain and burning came in waves, but they quickly began to recede. But just as he thought it was over, a mysterious voice echoed in his mind, as if coming from both infinitely far away and right beside him.
The sound was like steel thorns piercing his brain, stirring it forcefully.
Suddenly, the near-death experience he had faced before returned, and the pain and burning flared up once more.
Lumian gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, feeling as though something was trying to claw its way out of his flesh.
The gray fog around him seemed to thicken.
The terrifying sound that had filled his ears slowly faded away, and the writhing of his flesh and blood vanished like an illusion.
The excruciating pain, the burning sensation, and the metallic scent of blood dissipated, leaving Lumian gasping for cold air as he regained control of his body.
He bent over, hands on his knees, panting heavily as he realized the true dangers of pursuing supernatural powers, as his sister had

warned him.
A mere Sequence 9 potion had nearly claimed his life!
Of course, it had first seemed manageable—dangerous, but manageable. But the mysterious voice that had been brought on by the symbol on his chest had almost caused him to collapse at the critical moment.
Each breath he took seemed to restore some of his strength, and before long, he felt fully recovered.
Bang! Lumian clenched his fist and swung it hard, striking out at the air with a force that caused a sonic boom.
He had never imagined possessing such power before, and the realization filled him with excitement. In his small bedroom, he practiced a combat technique his sister had taught him, each punch producing a crisp sound.
Bang! Bang! Bang!
Despite the commotion, Lumian moved with precision and control, not touching anything as he completed the set.
To his surprise, he felt neither tired nor fatigued, but rather energetic and alive.
He assessed his condition:
On par with Aurore...
In terms of strength, speed, reaction, or body control, they've all been greatly enhanced. It's a little inhuman...
I possess the strength of a bear and the agility of a cat. It's slightly equivalent to the combination of the two...
Without the potion, I might never be able to reach this level of power in my life...
But before he could finish his inspection, Lumian caught the scent of blood, his heart tightening with fear. Instinctively, he sniffed the air and realized that he could determine the source of the blood—it came from his body!
Lumian looked down and saw that the back of his hand was covered in blood-red spots.
He came to the full-body mirror again and realized that his face was similarly stained.
He wiped some of the blood away, but found no sign of any wounds.
After a moment's thought, Lumian came to a realization.
Did the potion cause the capillaries Aurore talked about to burst? And then they quickly healed after I absorbed the potion?
The only explanation for his current condition was supernatural influence.
Realizing he was not injured, Lumian pushed the matter aside and focused on his sense of smell, which seemed to have undergone a

significant change.
As he concentrated, the scents around him were "decomposed" and drilled into his nose in various forms.
The smell of blood, the residual smell of alcohol, the fragrance of flowers, the smell of dust... Lumian began identifying the scents around him one by one, even the slightest ones not escaping his heightened senses.
Simultaneously, he "saw" invisible footprints and the distribution of dust in the bedroom, "heard" the beating of his own heart and the breeze outside the house...
The second change is that my sensory abilities have increased exponentially, surpassing the standards of ordinary humans. No wonder the monster he had encountered was so skilled at tracking...
Lumian was delighted.
More importantly, this improvement did not interfere with his daily life and only appeared when he focused. It only took the form of a weaker version.
Through experimentation and self-examination, Lumian discovered two other changes brought on by the Hunter potion.
The third change allows me to accurately locate certain points in his environment, such as weak spots in a wall, enabling me to set traps more efficiently and kill my enemies—be they humans, beasts, or monsters—more effectively.
The fourth change is that I have more knowledge about wild plants and animal organs, allowing me to survive better in the wilderness and quickly find hemostatic medicine when injured. I can even make poison to smear on weapons if needed...
As he confirmed these newfound abilities, Lumian couldn't help but feel a sense of absurdity.
I actually managed to kill that shotgun monster?
The current me is much stronger than the previous me, and it was not much weaker than the current me..
Lumian contemplated for a while and concluded two crucial points.
Ability is important, but brains are equally important!
Exploiting a good environment can effectively increase my strength!
After some thought, Lumian added inwardly, Also, I can't be careless and lose my patience at any time...
He walked to the window and gazed at the dream ruins again.
An indescribable sense of oppression, fear, and danger surged into his heart. This was something he had never felt before.
Uh, the fifth change is some kind of intuition strengthening...
Lumian nodded gently.

He went to the washroom and washed his body with clean water. He changed into a fresh set of clothes and then lay back on the bed, with the money close.
He wanted to get back to reality as soon as possible, eager to know if the Hunter abilities would stay with him or if they would be weakened.
.....
In the dead of night, Cordu was eerily silent. The clouds shrouded the crimson moon and stars, leaving the darkness to reign supreme.
Lumian surveyed the night scenery and felt an overwhelming sense of happiness.
He was now a Beyonder in the real world, and his powers hadn't weakened at all compared to the dream realm.
As an intuition struck him, Lumian unbuttoned his shirt and gazed down at his chest.
The black symbol resembling a thorn chain was slowly fading away.
It also appears in reality... Lumian muttered, feeling a twinge of unease.
He noticed that the bluish-black symbol that had loomed over the thorny chain existed only in his dreams.
Suddenly, Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he gazed up at the nearby elm tree. The legendary owl of the Warlock was perched on a branch, observing him quietly.

Chapter 28: Laws

The brownish-yellow eyes of the owl glowed in the dark, fixating on Lumian as it perched on the branch.

Lumian was no longer as intimidated as he was during their previous encounters. He yelled, "Whatcha looking at? Say something if you dare!"

Lumian didn't have to provoke the owl, but he hoped it would reveal the owl's true motive. He couldn't bear the thought of the creature lurking around and staring at him in the dead of night.

To his surprise, the owl remained silent and didn't make a sound.

After a few tense seconds, the owl spread its wings and flew off into the darkness.

"Crazy!" Lumian let out a frustrated curse, but he didn't dare let his guard down.

Lumian remained focused on scrutinizing the dark shadows outside, trying to detect any signs of danger.

He recalled that the last time the owl had appeared, he had seen Naroka's figure and learned of her death the following day.

I wonder if something similar will happen this time... But after careful observation, he didn't notice anything abnormal and breathed a sigh of relief. He drew the curtains and lay back on the bed.

In the deep darkness, Lumian opened his eyes, contemplating his next move.

I wonder what this owl is trying to do... It's acting so strange and mysterious. It shouldn't be up to anything good...

Whatever. With the situation in the village, I have to leave with Aurore as soon as possible. I don't believe that it can follow us to Trier!

If I don't receive a reply tomorrow, we'll leave Cordu the morning after tomorrow...

If there's a reply, we can leave Cordu openly from the village entrance. If not, we'll have to improvise. It's Lent tomorrow, and everyone will still be celebrating the day after tomorrow, so we won't attract too much attention. Aurore can borrow Madame Pualis' pony and spend some time in the nearby alpine pastures. We don't need to go down the mountain, so it shouldn't attract the investigators' attention. When the time comes, we can use a dangerous trail to leave the mountain...

The path is treacherous, with several broken parts in the middle. Even the shepherds don't think it's passable. However, with my newfound abilities and Aurore's witchcraft, allowing her to fly a distance, she'll have it easier than me...

There's a good chance we can hoodwink the investigators...
Becoming a Hunter had allowed him to do what was previously impossible. It gave Lumian a newfound sense of confidence, allowing him to quickly formulate a plan.
His heart became more certain, and he slept soundly.
.....
The next morning, Lumian rose early and got to work in the kitchen.
His thoughts turned to how he had become a Beyonder and how he was about to leave the abnormal village of Cordu with his sister. Lumian's mood brightened, and he even found himself eager to hum a tune.
When Aurore came downstairs, there were already two bowls of minced meat noodles on the table.
"How did you know I was about to get up?" she asked, pleased.
"I started cooking noodles when I heard movement in the washroom." Lumian grinned, inwardly noting, *You are always in a groggy state after waking up. How don't you realize this?*
Aurore nodded. As she sat at the dining table, she casually asked, "That owl flew over again in the middle of the night?"
"That's right." Lumian knew that his sister had discovered him looking out the window, so the owl's appearance had been a fortunate distraction. Otherwise, he wasn't sure how to explain himself.
He couldn't risk telling Aurore about his newfound Beyonder abilities just yet, as he would be given a dressing down by her.
However, Lumian planned to divulge the truth to his sister sooner than later. He wanted to avoid Aurore from having considerations that might hinder their escape.
He planned to tell his sister about this the day after tomorrow when they escaped from Cordu to prevent her from diverting her attention to take care of him.
By then, she wouldn't have the time to give him a dressing down.
Aurore furrowed her brow in confusion. "What a strange owl..."
She was still trying to decipher the bird's true intentions—all it did was come over to take a look.
Lumian slurped up the last of his noodles, then turned to his sister.
"If there's a reply, we'll leave Cordu this evening and take the usual path down the mountain.
"If not, borrow a pony from Madame Pualis tomorrow morning and we'll head to the nearest alpine ranch. I know of a trail that leads down the mountain, and the investigators won't be aware of it."

Aurore fiddled with her hair, deep in thought.
After a while, she grinned and said, "Sure, the probability of this plan succeeding is quite high."
She clicked her tongue and added, "My stupid brother has grown up."
Lumian couldn't help but feel smug, basking in his sister's praise.
.....
After breakfast, Lumian made an excuse to go see if Ava was finished with her Spring Elf blessings tour. He left the subterranean building and headed straight to Ol' Tavern.
As a newly-minted Beyonder, Lumian was eager to gain more knowledge, and the lady had promised to share some with him.
Not far from the tavern, Lumian spotted an old acquaintance walking towards him.
It was Pons Bénet, the younger brother of the local padre.
He's alone... Lumian couldn't help but smile at the thought of how he had been chased by Pons and his thugs in the past.
Having just obtained supernatural powers, he was already eager to test out his new supernatural powers.
"Hey, my illegitimate son," Lumian greeted him. "How dare you go out alone without daddy's permission?"
Lumian hoped to provoke Pons and goad him into a fight instead of letting him run.
Pons Bénet looked in the direction of the voice and saw him.
The villain's expression changed slightly. He turned to run away.
Thud. Thud. Thud... Lumian watched in disbelief as Pons sprinted away, disappearing at the intersection not far away.
He sure ran fast... Quite an alert one...
Lumian sighed silently.
He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he could take down Pons Bénet in a one-on-one scrap, even before he ascended to Beyonder status. But it seemed likely that Pons Bénet had the same notion. The two of them had never properly thrown down, but they both had confidence in their own abilities. So, it caught him off guard when Pons Bénet bolted the second he caught sight of him today, like he'd come face to face with a bloodthirsty beast.
It's impossible for him to know that I secretly became a Beyonder last night… Is he so dense that he's developed animal instincts and can sniff out danger? Lumian slandered Pons Bénet in his heart.
He refrained from pursuing Pons Bénet because he regretted the moment he "greeted" him.
The village was riddled with aberrations, and the situation was perilous. Lumian knew better than to stir the pot before he left.
If he had pummeled Pons Bénet, the padre and his goons might

spring into action prematurely, thus jeopardizing his and Aurore's escape. It would be too late for regrets when that happened.
Furthermore, the padre's group was an enigma, and there could be something off about Pons Bénet. Lumian suspected that if he engaged in fisticuffs with him, his Beyonder identity would be exposed, and that would spell trouble in the future.
Being a Beyonder has made me too haughty and overconfident. I need to rein myself in, Lumian mused, reflecting on his behavior, as he entered Ol' Tavern.
He had intended to head straight to the second floor, but his eyes landed on the lady seated in the corner.
Today, the lady was garbed in a pearl-gray dress and a light-colored lady's bonnet. Lumian noticed that there wasn't any food in front of her.
"Have you had breakfast?" he asked, taking a seat opposite her.
The lady replied nonchalantly, "Not yet. I'm meeting someone here, and I'm still waiting for her."
Her? Not me...? Lumian scanned the area but saw no one else except the tavern owner.
He looked at the lady again and sincerely said, "I've become a Hunter."
It's time for you to keep your promise and give me more common knowledge.
The lady wasn't surprised at all. She remarked with a smile, "It seems you're in pretty good shape."
She spoke in a voice that sounded almost otherworldly, "What you need to master now are two laws and one method."
Why does it feel like I'm studying physics... Lumian didn't dare speak his thoughts aloud.
The lady continued to speak, "For most Beyonders, this knowledge is incredibly valuable. They'd trade everything they have just to acquire it. But for you, fate has brought you here, and so I'll give it to you for free."
Free things often come at the most hefty price. *How will I pay the price?* Lumian felt a weight settle on his shoulders.
Ever since he became a Hunter, his intuition and observation skills had improved significantly. He could sense a strange, indescribable emotion in the lady's eyes, much stronger than before, but he still couldn't put a finger on what it was.
The lady straightened up.
"All supernatural powers come from the Oldest One, the Creator. As a believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun, you should know that His eyes became the Sun."
"Yes." Lumian had heard the padre's sermons about it before.

"That's a symbolic description," the lady clarified. "In essence, the Oldest One created this world and many deities. Eventually, He disintegrated Himself and split into Beyonder characteristics of different pathways."
"So that's why they're called the paths of the divine?" Lumian connected the dots.
The lady nodded slightly.
"Yes, every pathway's Sequence 0 is equivalent to a true god. For instance, the Bard pathway's Sequence 0 is known as the Sun, which is also the Eternal Blazing Sun you believe in."
Lumian was surprised and a little apprehensive. *So every Beyonder can become a god in the end?*
If he were a devout believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun, he would have accused the lady of blasphemy. But he wasn't that kind of person. He was just a casual believer who didn't give it much thought.
He even asked, "What's the Hunter pathway's Sequence 0? And what about the Mystery Pryer pathway?"
"Didn't I already tell you? It's the Red Priest, and the position is currently vacant," the lady replied with a chuckle. "As for the Mystery Pryer pathway, the Sequence 0 is known as The Hermit, and it's currently occupied by an evil god called the Hidden Sage. He likes to impart knowledge to Beyonders of the same pathway, earning Him the nickname 'Knowledge Pursuer.' Your sister's troubles stem from Him."
"Is that so..." Lumian felt a twinge of dislike towards the Hidden Sage.
The woman redirected the conversation.
"Since Beyonder characteristics come from the Oldest One, they won't disappear or increase. They only transform from one form to another, moving from one object to another. This is known as the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility or the Law of Conservation."

Chapter 29: Method

Lumian put his physics knowledge to work and pondered for a moment.

"Why not just call it the law of conservation?"

"That's another law, but don't worry about the details for now." The woman nodded in agreement. "Essentially, it's the same as the law of indestructibility, but with additional prerequisites and specific elaborations."

Is that so... Lumian considered for a moment before speaking.

"So, according to the law of indestructibility, if I want to obtain Beyonder characteristics, I can target other Beyonders, in addition to hunting the corresponding monsters?"

Since Beyonder characteristics were indestructible, a Beyonder's death would result in the appearance of the corresponding Beyonder characteristics.

The woman's face showed a certain amount of emotion.

"You're very perceptive."

"Therefore, this law isn't suitable for most Beyonders to know. It would result in Beyonders killing each other, and they won't be able to trust each other."

Lumian didn't mind this. "Even without this law, humans still kill each other. In the real world, there's plenty of suspicion, bullying, and murder."

The woman replied with interest, "But at least there's still a certain warmth and light of the human spirit."

Lumian pondered for a while before speaking.

"Looking at it from another perspective, this law should become a consensus among Beyonders. That way, the weak can be prepared in advance and not become easy prey for those who know."

The lady nodded slightly.

"That does make some sense. Actually, if battles between Beyonders happen frequently enough, people involved would likely be able to figure it out."

She then introduced, "The second law is called the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence."

"Convergence..." Lumian struggled to understand.

He couldn't quite derive it from their earlier conversation.

The woman's expression turned serious.

"As the creator of this world, even if the Oldest One splits into Beyonder characteristics of different pathways, it doesn't mean that He has completely withdrawn from the stage. His mind is scattered among the different Beyonder characteristics and will never be obliterated unless this world completely perishes.

"These minds are similar to a brand, but they have the instinct to reassemble and revive the Oldest One.
"In other words, after you become a Beyonder, you're more likely to encounter other Beyonders than before. You're more likely to encounter Beyonders of the same pathway or neighboring pathways than Beyonders of other pathways. This is the convergence of fate. The higher the Sequence, the more obvious this situation becomes."
Lumian had many questions, but he decided to start with the most important one.
"So, combined with the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility, can I conclude that convergence leads to massacres?"
The lady once again revealed an approving expression.
"You're very perceptive on such matters."
"It's not a problem when your Sequence is low, but at the demigod stage, especially after becoming an Angel, you must find a way to weaken or avoid the effects of convergence."
"Demigod, Angel?" Lumian was surprised and intrigued upon hearing these terms, even though he knew that every Sequence could eventually become a true god.
The lady casually explained, "Demigod is a term for Beyonders from Sequence 4 to Sequence 1, meaning half-god, half-human.
"Among them, Sequence 4 and Sequence 3 are known as Saints, while Sequence 2 and Sequence 1 are called Angels. There are other names beyond that, but it's best if you not know them for now."
Saints... Angels... Lumian thought of the saints and angels from different regions.
They were real?
The remains of a Saint are the corpses of Saints. *There are Beyonder characteristics left behind?*
Lumian asked, feeling a little afraid, "So every Beyonder characteristic has the mental imprint of the Oldest One, and the higher the Sequence, the more is left behind?
"Wouldn't the person who consumes the potion be affected in other ways?"
The lady confirmed with a smile, "Yes, why do you think this path is filled with danger and madness?
"Losing control is one of the main reasons why consuming a potion can be so dangerous.
"To be specific, it's losing control of supernatural powers and one's own mind and transforming into a terrifying monster."
"Is there another reason?" Lumian pressed.
The lady tersely grunted.

"Firstly, the intensity of the mental imprint mainly depends on the level of the owners of the corresponding Beyonder characteristics. Their obsession and madness before death also contribute to it. Secondly, consuming the potion in the wrong order or method can cause a huge conflict in the body. Thirdly, some existences can use the consumption of potions to exert influence. For example, every time the Mystery Pryer pathway consumes a potion, they passively receive knowledge instillation from the Hidden Sage."
Similar to the voice I heard after drinking the Hunter potion? Lumian deliberated for a moment before recounting his encounter truthfully.
"Which entity's influence is that?"
The next second, he saw the expression of the lady opposite him become a little odd.
She said solemnly, "Some existences can corrupt and take control of you just by knowing of their existence.
"Unfortunately, the owner of that voice is one such existence. It's not suitable for you to know Their honorific name at the moment."
Lumian's mind raced with thoughts. *That horrifying? A Sequence 0 true god? But most people in Intis and I know about the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery. There's nothing wrong with them... Could there be a difference between a true god and an evil god? But she mentioned the Hidden Sage, who is also a Sequence 0. Is it possible she doesn't know who it is and is using vague terms to mask her ignorance?*
He gave up on the topic, considering his own strength, and asked about another intriguing term.
"What is a neighboring pathway?"
The woman's expression returned to normal as she explained, "Under normal circumstances, if you choose a pathway and consume the corresponding potion, you can only go down that path one step at a time. Otherwise, you will definitely lose control, or at the very least, half-lose control. However, there are always exceptions. Every pathway has one or more neighboring pathways. You can jump over at a specific Sequence, such as Sequence 4, which divides between humans and demigods."
"Hunter's neighboring pathway is Assassin."
Assassin... Sounds cooler than Hunter... Lumian asked with concern, "Which pathways neighbor Mystery Pryer?
"Will one no longer be affected by the Hidden Sage after jumping to a neighboring pathway?"
"The Savant pathway. The current Sequence 0 is the God of Steam and Machinery," the woman replied calmly. "After jumping over, one will still be affected by the Hidden Sage, but the degree will

decrease significantly. However, the corresponding Beyonder characteristics still exist unless one finds a way to expel them."
"How?" Lumian asked, surprised.
"The easiest way is to have children. In mysticism, there's a high chance of transferring the corresponding Beyonder characteristics to a child through heredity," the woman explained. "Alternatively, you can use the special abilities of certain pathways, but there's a certain risk, and you have to pay a considerable price."
Lumian nodded before raising another question.
"Can I switch only at a particular Sequence?"
The chances of reaching Sequence 4 and becoming a demigod were slim.
The lady glanced at him.
"In theory, it's possible to switch at a lower Sequence, but the risk of losing control is much higher. Unless there's no other way, it's best not to attempt it."
The woman paused before saying, "I've finished explaining the two laws. Now, I'll explain the method.
"This is one of the most important pieces of knowledge in the mystical world."
Most important? Lumian instinctively straightened his back, feeling abnormally focused.
The lady continued to speak, "It's called the 'acting method.'
"It's a way to help you digest the potion. By digesting the potion, the risk of losing control will be greatly reduced when consuming the next Sequence potion."
It's no wonder I can't drink the Sequence 9 potion today and drink the Sequence 8 potion tomorrow... I have to use the "acting method" to digest the previous potion... Lumian came to a realization.
He did not interrupt her and listened attentively to her explanation.
"Remember, it's digestion, not control.
"What's the acting method? It involves acting according to the name of a Sequence like an actor. By reconciling the differences between one's body and the remnant mental imprints of the Beyonder characteristics, one can obtain the corresponding recognition. This allows them to bypass the barrier that originally existed and fuse the Beyonder characteristics with themselves."
"So, I have to act like a Hunter and hunt in the mountains every day?" Lumian asked attentively." Lumian appeared as attentive as a student.
The lady shook her head.
"That's just the most superficial form of acting. We not only have

to understand the surface meaning of a Sequence's name, but we also have to investigate its deeper meaning. For example, the city is also a jungle. Everyone is both prey and hunter."
I'm familiar with this... Lumian was already familiar with this concept, which he had learned during his days as a vagrant.
"How can you be sure that you have digested the potion and can advance to the next Sequence?" Lumian asked curiously.
The lady smiled.
"You will sense it when the potion is truly digested."
Alright... Lumian didn't continue the topic and asked in puzzlement, "Who named the different Sequences?"
Why could he digest the potion just by acting them out?
The lady's expression turned serious.
"The earliest Sequence divisions came from the remnants of the Oldest One's splintering. It was a stone slab filled with mystical knowledge.
"As it involves the secret of becoming a deity, it's called the Blasphemy Slate.
"In ancient times, during the end of the Second Epoch and the entire Third Epoch, a powerful deity close to the Oldest One appeared. He was called the Ancient Sun God. After He perished, a second Blasphemy Slate was born from His remains. All the current Sequence names and potion formulas came from it."
That's not the Second and Third Epoch history I learned... Lumian muttered inwardly.
The lady continued to speak, "When Emperor Roselle was alive, he used the second Blasphemy Slate as a reference to create a Cards of Blasphemy set based on tarot cards. There are a total of 22 cards, and each card represents a pathway of the divine."
Lumian was astonished. "Emperor Roselle is also a Beyonder?"
As an ordinary Intisian, it was difficult for him not to feel a certain amount of admiration for Emperor Roselle.
The woman laughed. "Otherwise?"
Lumian asked, "Was he powerful?"
"Almost a deity," the lady said concisely.
That amazing? Lumian was stunned but felt that it was only right.
He thought for a moment and said, "Then, wouldn't the diary left behind by Emperor Roselle be very valuable?"
The lady nodded.
"Yes, but there are very, very few people who can decipher those strange writings."
Lumian fell into deep thought. Aurore seems to have some of Emperor Roselle's diary transcripts in her collection. *She seems to be able to decipher them... Could it be that a portion of her strength*

comes from there?

Chapter 30: Lent Begins

The woman turned her head to look out of Ol' Tavern's window.
"It's about time. I'll end this with giving you some pointers. Based on the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility, we know that humans and Beyonder characteristics combine to become Beyonders. Similarly, creatures and Beyonder characteristics combine to become Beyonder creatures. But what about items that combine with Beyonder characteristics?" she asked, not giving Lumian a chance to answer.
"They are called mystical items. As items don't have will, spirit, and self-control, coupled with the combined effects of other factors, after they fuse with Beyonder characteristics, they will not only display corresponding special abilities but also bring about very strong negative effects. The various Churches tend to seal them and use suitable methods to activate them when needed. This is why mystical items are also called Sealed Artifacts.
"The mystical items that have been sealed by the various Churches have their own serial numbers and are divided into four grades: 3, 2, 1, and 0. The smaller the prefix number, the higher the danger. Among them, there are a limited number of Level 1 and 0 Sealed Artifacts that are extremely dangerous. The serial numbers are common to the various Churches and won't be repeated."
Lumian muttered, "Level 0 Sealed Artifacts..."
Lumian had a deep impression that Sequence 0 was equivalent to a true god. This led him to make a certain connection and ask, "Are these Sealed Artifacts formed by fallen deities or exterminated evil gods?"
He had noticed that there were 22 pathways with Sequence 0s, but the number of deities clearly didn't add up.
However, Lumian also recognized that his lack of understanding of evil gods and secret existences might have caused this confusion.
"Not all of them," the lady replied after thinking for a moment. "Most of them are at the level of Angels. Only a small number have the ability to kill gods."
Lumian nodded. "I understand. I won't underestimate the items in other people's hands."
The woman added, "You can't underestimate the negative effects of Sealed Artifacts either. In the future, you will definitely come across Sealed Artifacts.
"Oh, and there's another category of items in the field of mysticism called extraordinary items. They are made by Beyonders of corresponding Sequences using their abilities, spirituality, or with the help of the spirit world or deities. They don't contain Beyonder

characteristics, but they have a certain level of supernatural effects. However, their strength will gradually dissipate over time. Charms, lotions, and other items can only be used once.
"In comparison, Beyonder weapons are more stable and can be used for years.
"As a Hunter, you lack the ability to deal with Spirit Body ghost-type creatures before Sequence 7. If you have the chance in the future, consider obtaining the corresponding Sealed Artifacts or Beyonder items."
Lumian listened carefully and asked, "The spirit world?"
He had seen this term in Hidden Veil, but it did not provide sufficient explanation.
The woman quickly explained, "From a mystical point of view, this world is divided into three levels: the real world, the spirit world, and the astral world. The rest are formed by attaching to one of these three, like the Underworld.
"I don't need to explain much about the real world; you already know it very well. The spirit world is a place where spirits reside, and many concepts of reality no longer exist there. You will gradually understand it in the future. As for the astral world, it originally referred to the world of gods, but now, the entire cosmos needs to be included in that definition."
Lumian was just asking casually, but after obtaining a preliminary answer, he immediately returned to the previous topic.
"Can a Hunter create Beyonder items?" he asked, thinking that Warlocks could probably do it.
The lady shook her head before saying, "Hunters can't rely on their own Sequence, but because their spirituality has been enhanced, they can learn ritualistic magic and pray to a deity or a hidden existence. They can use their responses to create charms, weapons, and other Beyonder items.
"However, I have to remind you that most hidden existences are very dangerous. It's best not to attempt praying to them. Otherwise, death would be the best outcome. And the seven orthodox gods basically won't respond to you unless you join the corresponding Church and become an official Beyonder."
"In other words, it's impossible for a Hunter to create a Beyonder item?" Lumian asked, feeling somewhat disappointed.
The lady smiled and said, "Not really. On the one hand, you can use the blood and saliva of certain Beyonder creatures to create poisonous weapons. In a sense, this can be considered a Beyonder item. On the other hand, after you unlock the secret of the dream, I'll tell you the honorific name of a great existence. You can pray to Him."

Lumian was shocked and suspicious. *This was the first time she had used the word "great" as an adjective. He had never heard her use it to describe the Eternal Blazing Sun or the Hidden Sage. Who could this great existence be? Was it safe to pray to Him?*
The more he learned about mysticism, the more he realized how little he knew.
Lumian tersely acknowledged her answer and asked, "What are the corresponding Sequences 8 and 7 for Hunters?"
The woman replied indifferently, "Sequence 8 of the Hunter pathway is called Provoker, and Sequence 7 is Pyromaniac.
"Alright, that's all for today," she said as she stood up and walked towards the entrance to the second floor.
After a few steps, she stopped and said over her shoulder, "I forgot to remind you. Remember, you're just acting."
Just acting... Lumian mulled over her words and thoughtfully asked, "What if you take the role seriously?"
"You will become less and less like yourself until one day..." The woman smiled and closed her mouth before turning around, walking to the stairs, and disappearing.
She didn't finish her sentence again... Lumian muttered silently.
He sensed that forgetting he was only acting would have serious consequences.
Lumian sat quietly in a corner of Ol' Tavern, reviewing the general knowledge the woman had just taught him to prevent forgetting anything.
The more he thought about it, the more he realized the importance of the two laws and one method.
They are like the main framework of mysticism. Everything else is derived from them.
I wonder if Aurore knows...
After leaving Cordu, I'll discuss this problem with her...
Uh, I wonder if that lady will allow me to inform Aurore of all these directly...
.....
As Lumian left Ol' Tavern, he looked back and muttered to himself, *Why haven't those three foreigners taken action yet?* It's already Lent today...
He continued to ponder as he made his way to the village square.
After he finished asking if there was any reply, he saw Ava, Reimund, and the others approaching.
Ava was wearing a long white dress with a round headdress made of branches and flowers on her head, and a huge necklace hung around her neck. Brown branches and green leaves adorned her back, arms, waist, and legs, making her look like a fairy in the

forest.
She was the main character of Lent, the Spring Elf.
Reimund and the other lads surrounded Ava, each carrying a basket woven from tree branches filled with grass, soil, rocks, leaves, and other items.
"Lumian, the blessing tour is about to begin!" Ava exclaimed when her aqua-blue eyes saw him.
Her face was filled with joy.
Reimund and the others also looked happy.
"Come on, let's go get the contributions!"
Since Novel Weekly had not yet replied, Lumian had nothing to do for the time being, so he decided to join the procession.
The young lads began singing loudly as they surrounded Ava and walked out of the square.
After about ten meters, they stopped in front of the first building.
Lumian walked to the door and banged on it.
"The Spring Elf is here!"
The door creaked open, and Nazélie appeared in front of them.
She was the other female head of the family in the village, in her forties with the prefix 'Na.' Her black hair was tied up, and her blue eyes were smiling.
As the door opened, Ava took two steps forward, spread her arms, and began singing.
"I'm the elf of spring,
With a sweet face and a joyful ring,
Bringing happiness to everything,
In this season so charming.
Come and sing, come and dance,
Let's celebrate this time of chance,
For this is the only way,
To bless the land and make it stay."
After the song, Ava took a clump of soil from Reimund's basket and handed it to Nazélie.
"Thank you, 'Spring Elf'," Nazélie said, receiving it with a smile and handing a piece of cloth to Ava.
"Bumper harvest! Bumper harvest!" Lumian and the other lads replied in unison.
This was a blessing ritual. The Spring Elf used singing and the giving of soil, grass, rocks, and other natural things to the villagers to bless them with a bumper harvest this year. The villagers needed to give something back as a contribution, or the blessing would become a curse.
After Reimund received the cloth, Ava sang another song enthusiastically.

Only then did they bid farewell to Nazélie and head to the next house.
A portion of the dedications received during the blessing tour would be thrown into the river in the waterside ritual, and the rest would be placed in the final ritual. After Lent was over, the girl who was the embodiment of the Spring Elf had the right to choose some to take away.
This was a considerable gain.
If Cordu really experienced a bumper harvest this year, Ava, as the embodiment of the "Spring Elf", would be widely believed to have received the love of the elves and blessings of spring. Whoever married her would have bumper harvests all the time.
In that case, she had a chance of marrying someone from a good family.
The blessing procession sang all the way to Lumien's house, where Aurore opened the door. She had changed into a light-colored pleated dress with a straight collar and had bunned her blond hair.
Ava walked over and sang the same song again.
"I'm the elf of spring..."
Aurore listened with a smile and handed Ava a small pottery jar.
"Thank you, Spring Elf."
Lumian glanced at the jar of animal lard and felt that his sister was too generous.
They had no farmland except for a small vegetable field at the back of their house and did not need to worry about the harvest at all.

Chapter 31: Celebration

Despite feeling the usual pinch, Lumian didn't stop his sister as Ava, Reimund, and the others turned around and walked towards the nearby buildings. He deliberately fell behind and whispered to Aurore, "Call me if you hear back from Novel Weekly."

"Don't worry, I'll keep you updated," Aurore replied, giving Lumian a reassuring look.

The festive and joyous blessing tour continued with songs as they knocked on the villagers' doors in Cordu.

Finally, they arrived at the administrator's residence, which was modified from a castle from the Sauron royal era. It was located on a hill at the edge of Cordu, dark in color with two towering towers.

The outer walls surrounding the building had long been torn down. Lumian and company passed through the garden specially created by the Béost couple and arrived at the entrance.

The door was four to five meters tall, a brownish-green color like trees, and looked very heavy.

However, it was divided into upper and lower parts and only needed to open the two-meter-tall part below unless welcoming esteemed guests.

The Spring Elf was the embodiment of spring and the messenger of the harvest, so she deserved the most honorable treatment. At this moment, the heavy door was completely opened, and Madame Pualis stood there in a light green corset.

Her lady's maid, Cathy, stood to the side with a basket woven from tree branches, half a step behind.

Ava walked over and sang a song of blessings.

Madame Pualis listened quietly with a smile on her face, which made her look noble and reserved. The young men who followed the Spring Elf didn't dare to look at her, but Lumian, who had "listened" to the other party and the padre doing the deed, scoffed inwardly when he saw this.

As the song ended, Ava exchanged the seeds of a tree for a basket of eggs.

The blessing tour was over, and Lumian, Reimund, and the other lads escorted Ava, the Spring Elf, to the mountain river not far from the village for the second segment of Lent: the waterside ritual.

Arriving at the place where geese were usually herded, Ava approached the clear river and did a simple dance, repeating the song from before. Meanwhile, Lumian and the other lads stood still, seven to eight meters away from the Spring Elf.

After the dance, Ava took out a chopped turnip from a basket

beside her feet, given by a particular villager, and threw it into the river.
As she threw, she sang, "A bumper harvest! A bumper harvest!"
When Ava was done, Lumian stepped on the ground and ran over in a few steps. He bent down and took out the cut turnips from the basket and threw them into the river.
"A bumper harvest! A bumper harvest!" he shouted.
The remaining lads were a tad slower than Lumian, but they rushed towards Ava, afraid of falling behind. They took out turnips and radishes from the basket and threw them at different parts of the river while shouting "bumper harvest."
Reimund failed to take the initiative and couldn't beat the others, so he was the last to complete the ritual.
The next second, he saw the malicious smiles of Lumian, Guillaume-junior, and the others.
They lifted Reimund up, shouting "bumper harvest," and threw him into the water with a splash. Reimund was drenched from head to toe.
The people on the shore even picked up soil and branches and threw them at him.
This was part of the waterside ritual: the person who completed the last prayer would be thrown into the river and not allowed to go ashore. They could only swim a little further down and quietly return home to hide until it was dark.
Reimund wiped the water droplets off his face and struggled for a few seconds before heading downstream.
Only then did the team escort Ava to the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral at the edge of Cordu's square.
It was almost noon. Most of the villagers, including Lumian's sister Aurore, had gathered at the cathedral, which was not as grand as those in the city. The tallest one was only 11 to 12 meters, with a dome in an arc that looked like an onion from the outside. Looking up from the inside, a dazzling sun mural greeted their eyes.
The entire cathedral was golden in color and looked very bright, which was also the common style of all the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedrals.
The altar was located in the east, and all kinds of Sun Flowers surrounded a huge Sacred Emblem.
On the surface of the Sacred Emblem, the golden ball and the lines representing light formed a symbol filled with mysticism: the symbol of the Eternal Blazing Sun.
High up on the wall behind the altar, there were two pure glass windows inlaid with gold foil. Every day, when the sun rose, the

light would shine from here onto the Sacred Emblem.
On the west side of the cathedral, there were two similar glass windows to take in the glow of the setting sun.
As this was not a formal ritual of the Church but a traditional celebration of the people, Padre Guillaume Bénet did not appear. Instead, Administrator Béost hosted the celebration with Ava, who was still dressed as a "Spring Elf," standing next to him. Musical instruments such as flutes and lyres sounded, and the villagers sang songs that praised spring and prayed for a bumper harvest.
They hadn't rehearsed, so the singing wasn't uniform, and some people even sang and danced, making the scene lively.
Lumian's mouth opened and closed, but he didn't make a sound—he was simply going through the motions. On the other hand, Aurore, who was beside him, was engrossed in her singing, taking the opportunity to have fun and raise her voice.
As he was only going through the motions, Lumian had time to look around.
He didn't notice any abnormalities in the villagers' behavior. He subconsciously looked up at the golden sun mural on the dome.
Then he saw it—the thing he couldn't quite put his finger on.
The villagers weren't praising the sun.
For a village that worshiped the Eternal Blazing Sun, this was strange. Words like "Praise the Sun" and "My God, my Father" were staples of daily life, but Lumian realized he hadn't heard them in a while!
As a quasi-believer and having skipped activities in the cathedral since crossing the padre, Lumian hadn't thought much of it before. But something about the solemn and golden atmosphere of the cathedral made him realize that this was not normal.
And then he remembered the letter of help that he had reconstructed, the urgent plea for assistance from someone in the village: "We need help as soon as possible. The people around us are getting weirder."
The people around us are getting weirder... At that moment, Lumian gained a deeper understanding and agreement with this sentence.
Lumian's heart raced as he looked around, searching for Leah and the other foreigners.
But they were nowhere to be found at this Lenten celebration.
Seriously, they don't appear when they're needed... Lumian muttered inwardly.
Lumian forced himself to join in the chorus, pretending not to notice anything out of the ordinary.
Finally, the singing died down, and the celebration ended. Lumian

whispered to Aurore, his voice urgent, "Go home first. I have something to tell you later."
He knew he couldn't leave yet; as an escort for the Spring Elf, he had to participate in the final part of the ritual.
He couldn't force his way out of the cathedral, risking an anomalous eruption.
Aurore nodded thoughtfully. "Okay."
She didn't ask further and left the cathedral with Madame Pualis and the other villagers, leaving Lumian behind.
The cathedral was empty, save for Lumian and a handful of lads who had participated in the blessing tour.
Ava, the embodiment of the Spring Elf, stood in the center of the room, surrounded by the contributions, symbolic items that hadn't been thrown into the river—herbs, axes, shovels, whips, and goose sticks.
Lumian and his companions had to wait for someone to come in from outside and announce the departure of the Spring Elf before they could take off her crown, necklace, branches, and leaves. During this process, they needed to leave a gap for the Spring Elf to leave Ava's body.
In just 20 to 30 seconds, footsteps echoed from the cathedral's entrance.
Lumian instinctively looked up. Two figures entered the cathedral.
The thin Shepherd Pierre Berry had rushed back to attend Lent. His eyes were sunken, and he wore a dark brown long coat with a hood. He had tied a rope around his waist and was sporting new black leather shoes.
But what caught Lumian's attention was that his greasy black hair was now clean and smooth. Even his messy beard had been tidied, and it was now neater and shorter than before. As usual, there was a faint smile in his blue eyes.
The other man was Padre Guillaume Bénet, adorned in a white robe with gold threads, befitting of his role as a clergyman. He had sparse black hair and a slightly hooked nose, but he exuded a dignified aura. Despite standing at less than 1.7 meters tall, he still seemed to tower over Shepherd Pierre Berry.
The padre... *Why did he come?* Lumian was surprised and puzzled.
As a clergyman of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, he had no business being here, at a folk celebration that didn't include a segment to praise the sun.
Lumian's mind jolted as he recognized that the padre and his group were previously up to something sinister, especially considering his past conflict with them. He quickly retreated to the side of the stained glass, moving slowly and silently to avoid

drawing attention to himself.
The group hadn't yet surrounded Ava, the Spring Elf, so they were standing in different places, making Lumian's actions inconspicuous.
Ava was surprised to see the padre, but she quickly remembered his importance in the village. It made sense for him to announce the end of the Lent celebration. She smiled once again.
Padre Guillaume Bénet and Shepherd Pierre Berry approached Ava, and the former spoke in a deep voice.
"Send the Spring Elf off."
Other than Lumian, people rushed forward to surround Ava.
"Send the Spring Elf off!" Shepherd Pierre Belly shouted as he bent his back with a smile.
Not good! Lumian's heart raced as he stepped forward, his body reacting before his mind could catch up.
But it was too late. Shepherd Pierre Berry picked up an axe from the pile of symbolic items, and with a tight grip and a powerful swing, the axe came cleaving down.
Blood spurted from Ava's neck, forming a thick red mist.
Thud.
Lumian watched in horror as Ava's head fell to the ground and rolled a few times in the blood, finally stopping, head facing up.
She still had a look of joy in her eyes.
Having just taken two steps in her direction, Lumian's heart sank.
He immediately turned around and turned to flee towards the stained glass.

Chapter 32: Anomaly

The cloth, jars, and eggs that were splattered with blood, along with the sickening stench, failed to elicit a reaction from Padre Guillaume Bénet. He turned his body and locked his gaze on a particular spot in the cathedral, where Lumian's figure was reflected in his blue eyes.

The color of the padre's eyes shifted, turning so ethereal that they appeared transparent.

Lumian was surrounded by complicated silver symbols that coiled around him like small rivers. He ran through an illusory river that was formed from these symbols, with blurry tributaries ahead of him.

Guillaume Bénet reached out his right hand and grabbed a mercury-colored symbol that encircled Lumian.

Lumian stomped his right foot, preparing to hurl himself through the stained glass and out of the cathedral.

But he slipped and couldn't muster enough strength, and his body was sent flying.

With a loud bang, whoosh, and cracking sound, Lumian shattered the stained glass depicting Saint Sith, but he failed to break through it and instead crashed back into the cathedral.

His body was covered in cuts, and blood flowed freely.

Shepherd Pierre Berry, who had earlier decapitated Ava with an axe, locked onto Lumian.

His gentle smile belied the ferocity in his blue eyes, as if a seal inside him had been undone, revealing his true nature.

Pierre Berry charged at Lumian with the axe, his body seeming to grow taller and stronger with every step.

Lumian leaned against the broken stained-glass window, his back facing the ruthless shepherd.

Lumian struggled to free himself from the pain of being stabbed as he fell heavily to the ground. As he propped himself up with his hands to roll out of the cathedral, an abnormal sense of danger washed over him.

Someone's behind me, he realized. Ignoring the pain and blood, he continued pressing down on the broken glass window frame and pretended to roll out, using it as a cover to quickly retract his body and fall back instead of moving forward.

Bang!

Suddenly, an axe smashed into the window frame, sending it flying out of the cathedral with a loud bang.

Lumian rolled backward, narrowly avoiding Pierre Berry's violent attack as he lunged past his feet.

But he didn't feel relieved. Pierre Berry had blocked his only escape route, forcing him back into the cathedral.
Despite having read countless novels, Lumian knew he couldn't rely on simply rolling to avoid getting hit. As he brushed past Pierre Berry, he quickly propped himself up with his elbow, exerted strength from his waist, and bounced up.
He surveyed the scene and realized that, besides Guillaume-junior and a few others, all the lads had lost their minds and turned deranged.
They ignored Ava's headless corpse and the blood that stained the ground, shouting excitedly, "Send the Spring Elf off! Send the Spring Elf off!"
Guillaume-junior and a few others stood in shock, staring at Ava's wide, smiling eyes without moving.
Fear, panic, and disbelief etched their faces, as if trapped in an unbreakable nightmare.
Pierre Berry loomed over Lumian, appearing taller than the cathedral dome.
His axe missed, but he quickly retracted it and swung at Lumian again. Lumian deftly dodged the attack and ran off despite not even finding his footing.
Thud thud thud!
Lumian fully utilized a Hunter's speed and agility as he ran in an arc.
Target: the padre!
He knew he had to deal with the leader, no matter how the others attacked him. He put on a fierce stance, determined to either let them allow him to flee or die trying with him.
Only in this way could a miracle be created in a very unfavorable situation.
Shepherd Pierre Berry didn't pursue Lumian. He stood in front of the broken window frame, holding his blood-stained axe and extending his left hand towards Lumian's direction.
The cathedral plunged into darkness, and Lumian's surroundings grew even more ominous.
Seemingly coming to life, the abyss swayed gently, like a curtain behind which pale-white, pitch-black, and strange arms were poised to strike.
Padre Guillaume Bénet's eyes were nearly transparent, with Lumian's figure submerged in an illusory river formed by shimmering mercury symbols. In front of him, he saw something similar but more surreal, as if representing the future or a tributary.
After experimenting, Guillaume Bénet's right hand finally grasped

the key pattern formed by multiple symbols.
With a single move, he could rewrite Lumian's future and render all his efforts futile.
But suddenly, the padre's eyes froze, and he let out a scream. His eyes shut tightly as blood and turbid tears streamed down his face.
Amidst his scream, his body expanded like a balloon being filled with gas, and his white robe with golden threads cracked under the strain.
His skin turned nearly transparent, revealing the bizarre mark that had been hidden beneath his clothes.
The black marks that resembled a seal connected to an indescribable world. The terrifying aura they emitted filled the cathedral, leaving the lads who were still sending off the Spring Elf in a state of extreme terror. They either ran around the offerings, knelt on the ground, or prostrated themselves on the floor, afraid to look up.
Guillaume-junior and a few others fainted from fear, leaving pools of urine and a foul stench.
Shepherd Pierre Berry was about to use his mystic arts to grab Lumian when he threw away his axe and knelt on one knee, bowing his head and ceasing all movement.
Lumian was the only one who remained unaffected in the entire cathedral.
Although he felt an abnormal pain in his head, it was nothing compared to the mysterious voice that had nearly killed him.
He also felt a burning sensation in his chest, suspecting that the black thorny chain symbol had appeared, along with the bluish-black symbol resembling an eye and worms.
However, he had no time to check his physical condition or understand why he suddenly had the upper hand. He continued to run towards Padre Guillaume Bénet, determined not to let any opportunity slip by!
As he got closer, Lumian could clearly see the unique black marks resembling seals made up of strange symbols and words.
His gaze quickly swept around and he noticed something familiar: black symbols resembling thorns that drilled out of the left chest of Padre Guillaume Bennet and circled behind him.
It was identical to Lumian's chest, but much lighter.
He has one too?
Lumian's heart trembled.
Is this the root cause of the abnormality in the village?
Why do I have it? When did I get it?
...
Thoughts quickly surfaced in Lumian's mind, but he didn't let

them distract him from his movements.
He ran towards Guillaume Bénet, stretched out his right arm, and wrapped it around the enemy's head.
Without pausing, he forcefully circled behind the padre, and with a snap, Guillaume Bénet's head turned and faced his spine.
Phew... Lumian breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that the biggest problem had been resolved. He had to hurry home and escape with his sister, leaving the rest to the three foreigners to deal with.
But just as Lumian turned to leave, Guillaume Bénet, who was supposed to be dead, opened his eyes.
They were bloodshot, and a sharp buzz split Lumian's head in half, the intense pain preventing him from screaming.
Everything shattered before his eyes, and he was engulfed in darkness as he lost consciousness.
.....
Painful!
How painful!
Lumian suddenly sat up, opened his eyes, and rubbed his head.
He saw the familiar surroundings of his bedroom: the wooden table, the reclining chair, and the wardrobe and small bookshelves on both sides.
I was saved by Grande Soeur? *How long was I out? How is the situation in the cathedral?* Lumian didn't have the time to think through it. Without wasting any time, Lumian got off the bed, held his head, and rushed out.
He found Aurore in the kitchen on the first floor, wearing a light blue dress and preparing dinner.
Lumian shouted, "Aurore! Grande Soeur, we need to run! The padre and many people in the village have gone crazy. They killed Ava at the end of the celebration!"
He wasn't sure if his sister knew about the incident, so he got straight to the point. After all, there were many ways to be saved, and it did not mean that she had to be at the scene.
Aurore turned around, looking confused, and asked, "Celebration? The Lent celebration?"
"Yes." Lumian nodded vigorously.
Aurore smiled.
"That was one hell of a story. Two sentences and you've got me feeling all kinds of scared. But listen, you gotta be more careful with your tales. Lent's still a few days away."
"..." Lumian was stunned.

Chapter 33: Confirmation

Lumian gazed into Aurore's eyes for a moment before slowly asking, "How many days until Lent?"

He suspected his sister was trying to prank him, but he had never known her to be flippant about important matters. This was a crucial moment that would impact the whole village, and possibly even their survival.

Aurore sized him up and quipped,"Did you not take an afternoon nap? Are you still not fully awake? It's March 29, 1358. We still have a few days before Lent."

March 29... Lumian ruminated the date for a moment and wondered if he was dreaming.

He had vividly experienced Lent--a period of merriment that ended in a bloodbath. He had witnessed Shepherd Pierre Berry hack off Ava's head with an axe and blood spurt everywhere...

Was he dreaming now, or had his past experience been a dream? Regardless of which one it was, they both seemed too real. Lumian couldn't detect any signs of deceit on his sister's face.

Sure, Aurore could be an excellent actress, but Lumian believed she was not that kind of person.

They had spent five years together, and he knew every detail of her personality. There was no way she could have fooled him!

Lumian was perplexed as he considered the possibilities of his sister Aurore lying to him about the date.

Either she was being controlled by the padre or some secret entity or everything had been resolved and she was just messing with him.

If neither of these options was true, then it was likely that Aurore was telling the truth.

Time had rewound to March 29th, a few days before Lent.

With Lumian's understanding of the world, this was clearly impossible and shouldn't have happened. However, his sister's attitude left him at a loss.

I have to think of a way to confirm it... Lumian tried to recall everything that had happened during that time period and realized he could easily remember most of the details--Aurore was wearing a light-blue dress on that day on the 29th March corresponding to the "successful" celebration of Lent. He also remembered meeting Leah, Ryan, and Valentine that night before taking them to the cathedral to catch the padre in the act.

"What's wrong?" Aurore stretched out her right hand and waved it in front of her stunned brother.

Lumian quickly gathered his thoughts and said, "Aurore, I just

remembered something. I need to go out for a while. I'll be back soon!"
Lumian realized that the only way to confirm if time had really returned to March 29th was to find Ava.
If she was still alive, he would have to come to terms with this unbelievable change.
He didn't wait for Aurore's response and hurried to the door, bypassing her.
"Call me Grande Soeur! Don't be late for dinner!" Aurore shouted after him.
As he ran towards Ava Lizier's house, Lumian feared that if he were even a second slower, he would be caught in an indescribable nightmare and completely devoured.
Along the way, many villagers noticed him, but they were afraid it was a prank directed by him and didn't stop to ask for a reason.
Finally, Lumian reached his destination.
Guillaume Lizier, Ava's father, was a famous shoemaker in the village of Cordu and the surrounding mountains. Although they weren't particularly rich, they weren't too bad either. They lived in a subterranean grayish-blue two-story building with an empty space at the back where grass and firewood were piled up, and a goose house was repaired.
It was almost dinner time when Lumian arrived, and several figures were busy in the kitchen of the Liziers' household.
Lumian walked through the open door and immediately saw Ava.
This brown-haired girl with aqua-blue eyes was wearing a gray-white dress and preparing dinner for her mother. Her hands and feet were nimble, and her eyes were lively. Lumian could tell just by looking at her that she was alive.
She's really not dead... Lumian thought to himself as he looked at Ava's neck, trying to find signs of stitches.
In one of Aurore's horror novels, there was a scene where a corpse was stitched up to act as a living person.
But Ava's neck was long and smooth, without a single scar.
Guillaume Lizier, the shoemaker, noticed Lumian standing in the doorway and asked, "Lumian, what's the matter?"
He stood up from his kitchen chair and faced Lumian, his brown hair disheveled, and a slightly greasy brownish-white apron hanging in front of him.
Ava, who had been busy in the kitchen, turned around in surprise and looked at Lumian.
She saw Lumian standing there in a daze.
"What's the matter?" she asked.
Lumian was momentarily stunned but quickly regained his

composure and planned to make up a random reason to explain his visit.
However, Guillaume Lizier inspired him with a question.
He deliberated for a moment and asked, "Monsieur, did Pierre of Berry order a pair of leather shoes from you?"
He remembered that he and Reimund were supposed to meet Shepherd Pierre Berry the next morning and were surprised when he had abandoned his flock to rush back to participate in the Lenten celebration despite the dangers of the long and difficult journey.
By that time, Pierre Berry had already put on a new pair of soft leather shoes.
Unless he went to a shoe shop in DariÃ¨ge that sold finished products, it would take time to make a pair of leather shoes. This meant that Pierre Berry had been back in the village for at least two or three days!
Guillaume Lizier was surprised by Lumian's question and said, "Pierre Berry came back a few days ago, but not many people in the village know about it. He also told me not to tell anyone else."
As expected... Lumian made up a reason and said, "I saw someone who looked very much like him and thought I was hallucinating.
"Because the man was wearing new leather shoes, I came to confirm it with you."
"It's him." Guillaume Lizier gave an affirmative answer. "He was still herding three or four sheep that he claimed his employer had given him."
Don't they only let the sheep return to the village in early May to shear and milk them? How are they to be grazed if a few sheep are brought back now? Grazing in the highland pastures is still prohibited... The more Lumian thought about it, the more he felt that Shepherd Pierre Berry's behavior was extremely abnormal.
And his performance at the end of the celebration proved Lumian's judgment.
However, he had no idea what he, the padre, and the others wanted to do, or what they had already done.
Lumian smiled at Guillaume Lizier and Ava and said, "I'm relieved that it's really him. I thought I was having problems with my brain and eyes because I drink too much."
He then waved at the Liziers and said, "Goodbye."
As Lumian left the Liziers' house, the smile on his face disappeared quickly.
He was now very confident that today was really March 29th.
Did I go back in time, or did I have a precognitive dream? Dreams can't be that real. They're so real that every detail is there... Lumian

thought hard as he walked.
Either way, it was something he had only read about in Aurore's novels and never imagined would happen in reality.
On his way home, Lumian circled the square and came to the side of the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral.
The stained-glass window, which should have been completely shattered, was perfectly embedded in the wall, and the Saint Sith missionary illustration on the surface shone brightly under the sunset.
Lumian watched this scene with mixed feelings. Many thoughts threatened to emit smoke from all the friction against each other in his mind.
On his way back to the square, Lumian saw a familiar figure walk out of the cathedral's main entrance.
It was the padre, Guillaume Bénet, who had a slightly hooked nose and a dignified aura, and he was wearing a white robe with golden threads.
Lumian's heart tightened, and he arched his body slightly, preparing himself for an attack or to flee.
Guillaume Bénet glanced at him and nodded expressionlessly.
"Come again tomorrow for prayers."
Uh... That's right. He hasn't been caught red-handed by me during the early evening of March 29th. He hasn't fallen out with me, nor is there any worry that his secret plot is about to be exposed... With this in mind, Lumian instinctively reacted.
He stood up straight and spread his arms.
"Praise the Sun!"
"Praise the Sun!" Guillaume Bénet replied with the same pose.
After leaving the village square, Lumian habitually recalled what had just happened.
Suddenly, he discovered a point that he had neglected previously because he was shocked by "time reversal."
He still had his superpowers!
He was still a Hunter!
He had not needed to catch his breath from running all the way to the Liziers, and he had immediately put on the best posture when facing the padre. This meant that his physique and corresponding condition far exceeded the time before he consumed the potion.
From this, Lumian made a judgment that the previous experience was not a precognitive dream, and he was already a Sequence 9 Beyonder!
I'll try entering that special dream at night to see if I can still enter and if there are any changes... Lumian quickly came up with the next step of his plan.

After returning home, Lumian pretended as if nothing had happened and had dinner with his sister, Aurore.
As he often acted this way because he didn't want her to help clean up the mess every time he got into trouble, Aurore didn't ask any further despite sensing that something was off.
After washing the cutlery and cleaning the kitchen, Lumian informed his sister and went straight to Ol' Tavern.
He wanted to confirm if the foreigners who didn't hail from Cordu would appear.
After entering Ol' Tavern, Lumian sat at the bar counter and greeted the boss and bartender, Maurice Bénet, and the thin middle-aged man, Pierre Guillaume.
"A glass of Whiskey Sour," he said with great familiarity.
Whiskey Sour referred to low-quality alcohol brewed from apples. It was only more expensive than some beer in taverns. People often hawked it on the streets of the city.
Maurice Bénet nagged, "Stingy brat, don't you like the pain of absinthe?"
Lumian said the familiar words, "Is it on the house?"
This made his mind feel a little adrift.
Maurice Bénet immediately stopped talking and poured a glass of Whiskey Sour for Lumian.
Lumian sipped his drink as he waited.
Not long after, he heard tinkling sounds.
He turned around to see Ryan wearing a rough dark bowler hat, a drab duffel coat, and pale yellow strides.
Leah attracted the attention of almost all the men in Ol' Tavern with her white pleated cashmere dress, off-white coat, Marseillan boots, and small silver bells tied to her boots and veil.
Similarly, Valentine wore a white vest, a blue tweed jacket, and black trousers, with his blond hair covered in a little powder.
The three of them walked to the bar counter under everyone's gazes and sat down beside Lumian.
Lumian didn't look up as he thought to himself, A glass of DariÃ¨ge red wine, a glass of rye beer, and a glass of CÅ"ur Ã‰picé...
Ryan took off his top hat and put it aside. Then, he said to Maurice Bénet, "A glass of DariÃ¨ge red wine, a glass of rye beer, and a glass of CÅ"ur Ã‰picé."
Lumian let out a long sigh, and Ryan asked, "What's wrong?"
Lumian took a sip of his Whiskey Sour and said in a deep voice, "I'm a nobody, with no time to notice the brightness of the sun..."

Chapter 34: Sayings

Lumian intended to observe, so he went through the entire process of getting to know Leah and her companions until they arrived outside the cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun.

He confirmed that these three foreigners really didn't know him and weren't on guard against his corresponding prank.

Has time really rewound... Lumian was momentarily in a daze.

Valentine said his 'lines' as he looked at the magnificent building in front of him that had blended into the night. "We've been here before. There's no one here."

Lumian composed himself and stopped following the procedure.

He said directly, "That's because the padre doesn't want to bother with you."

He planned on leaving the impression on these three foreigners, who were suspected to be official Beyonders, that he liked to joke but meant no harm.

Leah thought of several possibilities and asked, "You're saying that the padre is in the cathedral but isn't responding to the knocks due to certain matters?"

Lumian smiled.

"It's not suitable to have others see you having an affair in the cathedral."

After saying this, he instinctively muttered in his heart, Unfortunately, I can't hear the classic line 'You've ruined the holy church's plans!' this time.

Of course, after learning more about Madame Pualis, he felt that what the padre said was not entirely unreasonable.

Perhaps padres could be like the main characters in Aurore's spy novels, who were willing to endure temporary humiliation and betray their bodies to infiltrate the evil forces represented by Madame Pualis to complete an important mission.

Valentine's cold attitude changed as he asked anxiously, "Having an affair in the cathedral?"

Lumian spread his hands. "What's the problem? The padre does this every day. Relax. Isn't there a saying that goes, 'throughout the ages, it has remained unchanged: men will always pursue women?'"

Valentine snapped, "But this is a cathedral!"

Lumian thought for a moment and asked curiously, "So, as long as the clergyman doesn't have the affair in the cathedral, it's acceptable?"

"This is blasphemy against God!" Valentine was on the verge of exploding.

Ryan placated him with a pat on the shoulder, and the most composed foreigner in the group asked, "Do you know who the padre is having an affair with tonight?"
Lumian shook his head.
"There are too many possibilities. His mistresses include Madame Pualis, Madonna Bénet, Philippa Guillaume, and Sybil Berry..."
"Madonna Bénet? She has the same last name as the padre?" Leah interjected.
Lumian nodded. "She and the padre are cousins twice removed."
"..." Valentine was stunned for a moment. He gritted his teeth and asked, "Is Guillaume Bénet a servant of God or a servant of the Demon?"
Do you only know this line? Why don't I see you blowing up his head... Lumian deliberately defended the padre, "It's actually nothing. In Darième, we have a saying: 'Distant cousins, feel free to sleep together.'"
Leah laughed, tinkling the silver bell on her head. "Why do you have so many sayings?"
Lumian spread his hands again. "That's just how it is in the countryside."
Ryan interjected thoughtfully, "How do you know that we're not from Darième?
"You wouldn't have said, 'in Darième, there's a saying.'"
You told me this yourself... Lumian had been quick to shoot off his tongue and actually treated what had "happened previously" as information that he already knew.
He had no choice but to make up a reason.
"You don't look like Darième locals."
He pointed to the road leading to the village and said, "I've already helped you find the padre. I have to go home now."
Leah smiled faintly and said, "I thought you'd follow us."
"I don't dare offend the padre," Lumian casually mentioned. "The villager who snitched on him previously has been missing for a long time."
Without waiting for Ryan and the others to respond, he waved his hand and ran to the other side of the square, saying, "Remember to keep my secret, my cabbages!"
.....
Lumian walked along a starlit country road, the crimson moon obscured by clouds.
He pondered recent events, his hands in pocket.
As he neared his home, he looked up at the roof of the semi-subterranean two-story building.
As expected, Aurore sat there, hugging her knees and gazing at the

cosmos.
In the darkness, she seemed lonely and distant.
It has really repeated… Is there a possibility that what happened previously is real and I'm dreaming now? Lumian had just come up with a new guess when he suddenly realized the difference between the two March 29ths.
He realized that the woman who had given him the Wand card and taught him mysticism knowledge was absent from Ol' Tavern, preventing him from determining if he was dreaming or not.
I'll do a confirmation tomorrow... Lumian composed himself, walked to his house, and pushed the door open.
Just like last time, Lumian climbed to the roof using the ladder on the second floor and sat beside Aurore.
"What's so interesting about this view?" Lumian said deliberately.
Aurore turned her head and sighed. Just as she was about to speak, Lumian added, "I mean, what does the cosmos mean to you?"
Aurore sized him up.
"You're being rather direct today?"
She then looked at the cosmos and said faintly, "As you know, I'm not from Cordu or Darième. I don't know if you've ever heard the saying that home is where you can't return to..."
Lumian didn't joke as he looked into the cosmos.
Aurore proceeded to fly into her bedroom and write a letter to her pen pal. Lumian didn't reveal his newfound Beyonder status. He returned to the second floor, chatted with her sister about her pen pal, then closed Aurore's door and returned to his bedroom.
Upon seeing the white four-piece bed, Lumian's heart skipped a beat. He lifted the pillow and found the Minor Arcana tarot card representing the Seven of Wands!
Looking at the man in verdant attire with a determined expression on his face, his hand holding a wand, poised for battle his enemies, Lumian remembered the woman's interpretation of the card: "Crisis, challenge, confrontation, courage..."
The more Lumian thought about it, the more he felt that these four words truly revealed his current situation.
Before drawing the card, there was a high chance that he would enter a crisis and face challenges!
What I need to do next is to muster my courage and confront the problem? Wait, hasn't time already turned back? I haven't even met that lady or drawn the card. *Why is it here?* Lumian was alarmed. He wasn't too confident about his previous guesses.
All kinds of thoughts and deductions quickly emerged in his mind, like bubbles bubbling in boiling water.
This made Lumian's head hurt; he felt like he was about to go

crazy.
In the end, Lumian decided to treat the woman and the item she gave him as an "exception" for the time being.
With that lady's mysteriousness and uniqueness, it was considered normal for her to be unaffected by time reversal!
If I can find her tomorrow and she still knows me, it means that there's nothing wrong with my deduction... Lumian exhaled, feeling mentally exhausted.
He went to the washroom to wash up and went to bed early.
.....
Lumian woke up in the familiar, faint gray fog and sat up, seeing the wooden table and chair in front of the window.
He had once again entered the special dream.
Upon discovering that the Wand card still existed, Lumian knew he could enter.
Lumian subconsciously touched the inner pocket of his clothes, and his expression froze.
The gold coins were gone!
All the gold coins were gone!
Lumian hurriedly jumped off the bed and searched his entire body and the spot where he had been lying, but couldn't find them.
He didn't even have 1 coppet worth of copper coins.
Time has reversed here, too? Lumian suddenly had such a guess.
He looked around and didn't see the shotgun, axe, or pitchfork that should have been there.
He calmed himself and walked down to the first floor, where he found the pitchfork and hand axe in their original locations, identical to his first exploration of the dream ruins.
Similarly, the bucket of corn oil had not been placed beside the stove.
As for the shotgun, Lumian searched everywhere but didn't find it.
Lumian believed more and more that time had turned back in the dream.
I'll check the ruins and see if the two monsters are still there... Lumian muttered to himself silently. He picked up his axe and opened the door.
Not long after, he passed through the wilderness filled with crevices and weeds and arrived at the edge of the ruins.
Unlike the first time he explored this place, as a Hunter, he noticed many traces left behind by living creatures, including two that often appeared in the area when he put his mind to it. He followed one set of footprints to the half-collapsed house.
If I had such superpowers in the past, how could I have nearly been ambushed during my first exploration? Lumian carried his axe and

entered the building.
He went straight to his "destination" and arrived in front of the shattered pottery jar.
A sliver of gold seeped out from inside.
Lumian bent over and picked up the Louis d'or.
It was the same lustrous color as the first time Lumian picked it up.
Indeed, time has reversed. With very few exceptions, everything has returned to the original state... Lumian sighed.
Suddenly, he took two quick steps forward, twisted his waist, and half-turned to the right.
As he exerted his strength, the axe in his hand cleaved out.
The skinless blood-colored monster lost sight of its target just as it pounced from the roof. What greeted it was an axe.
Pfft!
Its head flew out, and its headless body fell heavily to the ground amidst the blood and pus.

Chapter 35: Differences

It's about as strong as the 'last time'... Lumian muttered to himself as he looked at the corpse of the skinless monster.

Before the time reversal, he had been evenly matched with the monster, relying on his intelligence to defeat it. Now, as a Beyonder, he only needed one swing of his axe to finish it off.

Of course, he had the advantage of already experiencing the same sequence of events and knowing the monster's attack strategy. This allowed him to anticipate its moves.

The contrast between before and after made Lumian feel that he had undergone a significant improvement after becoming a Beyonder.

After pondering for a moment, he moved the monster's corpse and head to a corner but did not hide it under rocks, wood, and mud, leaving it exposed along with the blood on the ground.

Lumian then quickly searched the half-collapsed building and found the remaining 197 verl d'or and 25 coppet, categorizing them into different pockets.

He flipped through the livre bleu again but found nothing out of the ordinary.

Once he had completed his search, he snuck deeper into the ruins. However, after only 20 to 30 meters, he changed course and returned to his starting point. Following the path the skinless monster had taken while alive, he nimbly climbed onto the half-collapsed roof.

After making the necessary preparations, he hid himself.

Minute by minute, Lumian waited patiently like an experienced hunter.

After an unknown period of time, a figure emerged from the ruins.

It was the same monster that had previously given Lumian a Hunter Beyonder characteristic, with its half-human, half-beast appearance, bent knees, greasy black hair, and shotgun on its back.

The shotgun monster approached cautiously, as if on a daily patrol.

Suddenly it sniffed the air and detected the blood in the distance.

It quickly changed direction and headed towards the half-collapsed, burnt building.

Following the trail of blood, the monster found the skinless monster's corpse and head.

It squatted down to examine it carefully.

On the half-collapsed roof, Lumian shook his head and muttered to himself, You can't even smell me from such a distance? Even

with the smell of blood, you shouldn't have missed me!
As he muttered, he raised his axe and struck hard at the crevice in the stone beside him that he had prepared earlier.
Crash!
The half-collapsed roof shook, and heavy rocks crashed down.
The shotgun monster reacted quickly, twisting its waist, kicking its feet, and lunging towards an uncollapsed area.
Lumian smiled and swooped down from the intact roof like an eagle grabbing its prey in midair.
In the midst of the howling wind, Lumian and the shotgun monster clashed in the air. Lumian raised his axe with one hand while the monster desperately tried to turn around and block.
Lumian clenched his left hand into a fist and punched down. As the monster extended its arm to block, Lumian opened his palm and reduced his strength, grabbing the monster's arm.
As Lumian pulled back with his left hand, he suddenly cleaved down with his axe in his right hand.
The blade struck the monster, and they both fell to the ground in a pool of blood.
Lumian, who had a buffer pad, was not affected by the impact. He raised his hand and cleaved the monster's head from its body with his axe once again.
Despite its unwillingness, the head rolled twice and separated from the body.
Standing up, Lumian looked at the monster and sneered, "You've weakened!
"All you have is a terrifying shell, nothing more than a stuffed scarecrow inside!"
As a Hunter, he was confident in dealing with the shotgun monster again, but he hadn't expected it to be so easy.
Looking at the corpse on the ground, Lumian patiently waited for the Beyonder characteristic to appear.
However, after waiting for a long time, he saw no sign of the dark-red light.
"Nothing?" Lumian muttered to himself in puzzlement.
He wasn't surprised, though.
Last time, he had obtained the shotgun monster's Beyonder characteristic and turned it into a potion that he had already consumed.
Since the time reversal didn't turn me back into an ordinary person, and the Beyonder characteristic in my body hasn't disappeared, it means that there's one less Hunter Beyonder characteristic here. The shotgun monster is only back in its living state, but it essentially lacks what's important. The question now is, why am I still the same

before the time reversal? He couldn't come up with an answer, so he decided to loot the copper coins from the shotgun monster and leave the ruins.

.....

The next morning, Lumian didn't feign a headache in front of his sister like he had on March 30th. Instead, he got up early and prepared breakfast, including toast, fried poached eggs, sliced bacon, and more.

Aurore was surprised to see Lumian's diligence. "Oh, you're so diligent? I thought you wouldn't be able to get up this morning after drinking so much yesterday."

Lumian casually replied, "Just a glass of Apple Whiskey Sour and a glass of absinthe. How is that too much?"

Aurore shook her head and smiled. "What's there to be proud of? Other than wine, other alcoholic beverages are unhealthy and affect our brains. No wonder you're becoming more and more stupid, my drunkard brother."

Lumian, who couldn't argue with his sister, muttered to himself, "Why is wine an exception?"

"Because I like it," Aurore replied, challenging Lumian to retort.

Lumian had no response.

After breakfast, he stayed home and kneaded dough instead of going out.

Aurore clicked her tongue in wonder.

"Did you cause any trouble? You're so obedient...

"Tell me, I won't beat you up. At most, I'll give you an additional combat class."

"Nothing." Lumian deflected the question and said, "I find things in the village getting weirder and weirder. Some people are acting more and more abnormally. Aurore, do you feel that way?"

Lumian had observed that his sister didn't have any memories related to the time reversal, but the abnormality in the village had to have started before March 29th. As a Mystery Pryer, Aurore might have sensed it but didn't pay enough attention to it.

Aurore's expression turned serious.

"Even you can sense that something is amiss?

"Tell me, who were the ones who made you feel this way?"

As expected, Aurore knew that there was something wrong with some people, but she didn't expect the problem to be so serious...

Lumian washed his hands and thought before responding, "Madame Pualis, the padre, Pons Bénet, and the shepherd, Pierre Berry, who returned to the village early."

"There is indeed something wrong with Madame Pualis. I knew something was off about her when she came to Cordu with the

administrator, but she was very restrained. Apart from constantly having extramarital relationships, there was nothing evil about her. I saw something on her..."
Aurore stopped herself, not wanting to drag Lumian into the supernatural world.
Constantly having extramarital affairs? Before Lumian found out that Madame Pualis was having an affair with the padre, he found Madame Pualis a decent lady. He was surprised to learn that Madame Pualis had affairs with men other than the padre.
Of course, this was in line with Lumian's stereotypical view of Madame Pualis.
"As for the padre, he has the same strong desire for superpowers as you, but he has never received the blessings of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church," Aurore continued. "A guy like Pons Bénet, whose brain is nothing but muscle, can't do anything strange. As for the shepherd, Pierre Berry, rushing back a few sheep seems a little off, but I can't tell what's wrong, and I don't dare to look deeper..."
As one would expect from a Sequence 7 of the Mystery Pryer pathway... Before the time reversal, I hadn't conversed much with Grande Soeur about such topics. In fact, I overlooked the crucial hint that there could be an issue with Pierre Berry's sheep... Yes, I didn't suspect Pierre Berry much back then. I just thought it was a bit odd for him to hurry back early to take part in Lent... Just as Lumian was about to speak, there was a tinkling sound at the door.
The doorbell rang.
Lumian walked over to the door and asked, "Who is it?"
"A telegram for Aurore!" the person outside replied loudly.
"A telegram?" Aurore was confused. "Who would send me a telegram? There's nothing urgent recently..."
Lumian was also puzzled.
They hadn't received any telegrams before the time reversal on March 30th.
Wait, Lumian thought. *I went to the village square early on March 30th to wait for Reimund. Perhaps Grande Soeur received a telegram but didn't tell me.* Lumian quickly opened the door.
Outside stood Bertrand, the administrator's subordinate in charge of telegrams. He handed a piece of paper to Lumian and said, "1 verl d'or."
The brown-haired, brown-eyed Bertrand was not from Cordu and had come here with the administrator from Dariège. He looked warm on the outside but was actually quite greedy.
Lumian tossed a silver coin worth one verl d'or to Bertrand and looked at the telegram.

The contents were simple. Lumian quickly browsed through it.
"The author salon mentioned before is in June. If you're willing, Miss Aurore, you can set off for Trier now. Leave enough time for a tour. We guarantee that this will be a very beautiful journey."
It was signed by the editorial department of Novel Weekly.
Wh... Lumian's eyes widened.
Was this a reply from Novel Weekly?
"When did I say I wanted to attend the author's salon?" Aurore leaned over and read the telegram. "What's wrong with the editorial department of Novel Weekly? It's annoying having to meet so many people at once!"
Bertrand was well away from the door by now. Lumian was stunned and suddenly had a bold guess. The telegram in his hand was indeed a reply from Novel Weekly, but it was a reply to the telegram he would send in a few days!
To be more precise, the telegram he had sent before going back in time had received a reply after the time reversal, and in his current experience, that telegram had yet to be sent out!

Chapter 36: Meeting Again

Lumian reached a conclusion that if his guess was true, Cordu and the surrounding area were the only places affected by the time reversal. Other places were not affected.

Lumian's thoughts raced, wondering if leaving this place would allow him to return to his normal life. He turned to Aurore and pretended to be guilty.

"Well, uh, this telegram is my doing."

"You?" Aurore was both angry and amused but, more importantly, at a loss.

She wondered if her brother had pranked her.

This was akin to being pecked in the eye by an eagle despite being an experienced hunter!

Lumian explained 'sincerely,' "Here's the thing. Haven't I always wanted to go to Trier to take a look? So, two days ago, I secretly sent a telegram to Novel Weekly at the telegraph office. I wrote it in your style to ask when the nearest author salon is. As expected, they warmly sent an invitation."

Aurore showed a look of enlightenment, as though the mystery was finally solved. "So that's how it is..."

The next second, she picked up a wooden stick beside her and gritted her teeth.

"So the child has grown up!"

Lumian quickly added, "Aurore, no, Grande Soeur, listen to my excuses. No, listen to my explanation."

He didn't panic and even deliberately joked.

"Fine, go ahead," Aurore said as she held onto the wooden stick. "I've always made sure that others accept any punishment with my best conduct. How can I convict someone without listening to the suspect's statement? Even if you are to die, I'll make sure you die knowing why!"

Lumian quickly said, "In Intis, Trier has the most and best universities. I'm going to take the college entrance examination soon, and I want to visit them to decide which three to apply for."

Aurore nodded slightly, indicating for Lumian to continue.

Lumian praised his sister sincerely.

"I believe that as long as I make this legitimate request, you will definitely take me to Trier. However, you will have to spend your money. If Novel Weekly sends an invitation, not only will the steam locomotive ticket and hotel accommodation fees be reimbursed, but also various entertainment expenses in Trier.

"I know you don't need the money, but all the writing you've done was painstaking work, word after word. I won't let a way of saving

money go to waste."
Aurore's expression eased.
"At least you care about me. But have you considered that I don't want to attend an author salon? I hate interacting with so many strangers."
Lumian smiled.
"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, have you thought that Novel Weekly invited you so warmly not to let you attend the salon, but to build a good relationship with you? You're a famous best-selling author. The salon isn't important; what's important is you. You can find a reason to reject the salon if you're willing to accept the invitation to visit Trier. The people at Novel Weekly will be glad that you accepted the first part of the invitation."
Aurore sized up Lumian.
"You're getting better at reading people."
She exhaled and said, "Alright, I'll handle some matters and pack our luggage. We'll leave for Trier in two days. Send a telegram to Novel Weekly before we leave and ask them to pick us up at the Trier train station."
"Alright!" Lumian couldn't hide his joy.
Although he suspected that it was impossible for him and Aurore to simply walk out of Cordu and find the corresponding source of the time reversal, he had to try. He couldn't trap himself in one place.
Having such thoughts, he had tried to convince Aurore.
Lumian didn't plan on telling Aurore about the time reversal because she had lost her corresponding memories. Lumian knew that it was unlikely that she would believe such a delusional speculation unless Lumian kept making prophecies that were eventually verified. However, he still pretended that he wasn't aware of the time reversal. He didn't plan on making prophecies for the time being to see if he could discover any clues.
Using reading as an excuse, Lumian returned to the second floor and entered the study.
He sat down and casually flipped open a book to confirm if he had it the right way up.
Then he sank into his own thoughts, hoping to make further sense of the current situation through the various details he discovered last night and today.
As his gaze shifted across the empty space, Lumian saw the livre bleu on the table.
His heart skipped a beat, and he retracted his thoughts. He stretched out his palm and took the livre bleu, flipping through it quickly.

The pages that were missing some words and had corresponding holes appeared before his eyes.
That letter... Lumian muttered silently.
He combined the "late" reply from Novel Weekly with the letter of help that Leah, Ryan, and the others had received, and he had a new guess.
Perhaps that letter was really written by me. I'm the murderer!
Time reversal might have happened more than once. According to the definition in Aurore's novel, this should be called a time loop.
In a previous cycle, I discovered a certain abnormality through certain exploratory actions and decided to seek help from the outside world by sending an anonymous letter without implicating Aurore. By the time officials realized the seriousness of the problem and sent Ryan and the others to deal with it, Cordu had already begun a new cycle. Like Aurore now, I lost all my corresponding memories and returned to my 'initial' state...
Now, that begs the question. *Why are words still missing from this livre bleu?*
Logically speaking, it should have returned to its "initial" state, just like the food I ate in the previous cycle.
There are two possibilities.
Firstly, if I discover an abnormality and ask for help before time starts to loop, then the relevant memories shouldn't be reset. Could there be another reason that caused me to lose a portion of my memories? This is getting more and more complicated...
Secondly, I had found a way to keep something from being affected by the loop during that particular cycle. *What could it be?* If there is, why don't I just find a piece of paper and write down what I found?
Lumian felt like he had cleared away a layer of fog and reconstructed the general situation, only to fall into even more confusion.
He believed that he had already experienced many time loops. However, in the previous cycles, his memories and physical condition would reset once he started from the beginning, so he did not notice it at all.
The reason why he could retain his memories and the Hunter Beyonder characteristic this time was that he had met the lady and obtained the Wand card. He had entered the dream ruins and activated the special trait in him.
Since the special trait brought about by the two symbols allowed Lumian to "bring" his Beyonder state in the dream to reality, it was completely possible for them to "save" his complete physical condition to the starting point of the cycle.

Therefore, even after the shotgun monster's condition reset, it still failed to retrieve the Hunter Beyonder characteristic... Lumian leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling as he slowly exhaled.
He then laughed self-deprecatingly.
I've just become a Beyonder, but I have to face such abnormal things. I don't even get the time to develop...
Uh, I can't confirm that the request for help was created by me. It might have been Aurore, and Madame Pualis is also a suspect. As Beyonders, they might have sensed something amiss during a certain cycle and tried to save themselves. With their mysticism knowledge, it's easier for them to find a way to preserve some traces than I can. Nonetheless, a time loop is indeed the best guess for the current situation.
As he pondered, Lumian realized a way to confirm the source of the letter.
The solution was simple. He would enter the dream ruins and flip through the same livre bleu at home.
If the livre bleu also had missing words, it meant that Lumian had created the letter of help himself. The home in the special dream was formed by his subconscious projection onto the mixed ruins. Everything he subconsciously knew would appear there.
If not, then it was most likely done by Aurore or Madame Pualis. Lumian's subconscious wouldn't know about this and wouldn't be responsible for it.
Lumian wasn't in a hurry to 'catch up on his sleep.' Seeing that it was about time, he sneaked out of the house and headed straight for Ol' Tavern.
In the corner of Ol' Tavern, he spotted a familiar figure.
It was the lady who had given him the Wand card and potion formula.
She was wearing a long orange pleated dress with a flounce collar and a light-colored frilly hat.
Lumian heaved a sigh of relief, feeling like a drowning person who had finally caught a lifebuoy.
He quickly walked over and noticed that there were not breakfast items on the table in front of the lady, but three stacks of tarot cards.
"Do you need me to draw a card?" Lumian probed.
"You've already drawn it." The woman shuffled the three stacks of tarot cards without looking up.
Lumian felt tears welling up in his eyes.
As expected, she was not affected by the time loop!
Without beating around the bush, Lumian sat down and asked

directly, "I, as well as the entire Cordu Village, have fallen into a time loop?"
The lady looked up and replied with a smile, "Yes, you're one of the Circle Inhabitants."
Lumian repeated the term 'Circle Inhabitants' to himself and asked in confusion, "What does that refer to? People caught in a time loop?"
The lady smiled and said, "There are two explanations. The first refers to people that obtained a special power equivalent to Sequence 4 after praying to a certain existence. The second refers to your current situation."
"You can obtain strength by praying to a hidden existence?" Lumian was very surprised by the first explanation of Circle Inhabitants.
Wasn't it the case that all 22 Beyonder pathways relied on consuming potions to advance?
The lady nodded slightly and said, "In theory, the Eternal Blazing Sun can also bestow the gift of Beyonder powers without the need for a potion. However, it is a burden to Him. It can only be used as a temporary measure. The more people who need a blessing, the greater the burden. It might even affect His state.
"There are also disadvantages to those who are bestowed. They will slowly become closer to the Eternal Blazing Sun, be it in body, mind, or spirit.
"Moreover, as it is a gift from a superior being, They can take it back at any time unless you possess the unique power of certain pathways and secretly complete a certain level of stealing while still having the gift."

Chapter 37: "Dangerous Forest"

Lumian paused for a moment and then said, "So the body, mind, and spirit will approach the bestower because the power of the gift carries a corresponding brand?"

He made this inference from the Beyonder characteristics left behind by the Oldest One and the previous owners.

Although the bestowment was pure strength and didn't contain any characteristics, it was also likely to have been tainted with all the previous owner's quirks.

The lady held the tarot cards and nodded in agreement.

"Your logical ability is impressive. You should thank Aurore for giving you enough basic education."

Lumian muttered inwardly, No need for your reminder...

The lady continued, "Even if the bestower doesn't wish to affect the bestowed, it's difficult to prevent the other party from approaching Them physically, mentally, and spiritually. This is because if the power bestowed doesn't contain the bestower's will, it will be challenging for the bestowed to control it, and it will quickly dissipate.

"Therefore, the blessings of the orthodox gods in this aspect are basically temporary and limited to a certain extent."

And the evil gods don't care what happens to the bestowed? Lumian nodded thoughtfully and asked curiously, "Beyonders, what I mean is, can people with Beyonder characteristics still accept gifts? Will the two conflict and cause them to lose control?"

The lady smiled and shook her head, "There may be some conflict, but not much.

"Think about it. The power of the gift will transform your body to match that of the bestower, but your body has already adapted to your Beyonder characteristics. So, there will be a conflict until you find a new balance. However, this conflict won't affect your mind or spirit, so you won't lose control unless you're on the brink of collapse. The only problem is that you might have to get used to seeing a third eye and a fourth hand growing on your body. Of course, the prerequisite is that the power bestowed on you will last for a long time. The corresponding level has to be very high as well. Otherwise, the little changes in your body can be ignored."

Lumian acknowledged the information in a terse manner.

"What if the gift is from the same or a neighboring pathway?" he asked.

The lady nodded.

"It won't cause any conflict."

She then chuckled.

"But that doesn't mean there won't be physical changes."
What does this mean? Lumian was confused and was about to ask for clarification when the lady interrupted him with a chuckle.
"I thought you'd be more interested in the time loop after learning about Circle Inhabitants. It's surprising that you're paying attention to this knowledge that may not be useful to you in the future. That's not like you!"
Lumian revealed a self-deprecating smile.
"I wanted to ask if you could help us break the time loop," he said. "But then I remembered what you said before. You claimed that the price for resolving the corresponding problem would be the complete destruction of Cordu. Everyone would die. If I wanted to achieve a better outcome, I could only rely on myself. I didn't understand it at the time, but now I can guess the reason. If you want to break the cycle and you're not a Circle Inhabitant, the only way is to destroy everything?"
The lady nodded in agreement.
"That's correct."
Lumian was confused and asked, "Then why didn't you make it clear before?"
It's not like it's something that would lead to destruction!
Or was this lady used to speaking in a half-concealed manner?
The lady immediately laughed.
"Would you have believed me if I had told you that the whole village was caught up in a time loop?"
Lumian thought about it for a moment and replied, "Probably not..."
It was difficult to believe such an absurd story without experiencing it firsthand.
The lady smiled and said, "That's why I didn't make it clear. I didn't want to spend a lot of time explaining it to you."
"..." Lumian fell silent for a moment before seizing the opportunity to ask, "Do you know what the key is to breaking this cycle? In what direction should I focus my efforts?"
The lady shook her head.
"Divination on certain matters is very dangerous here."
"Huh?" Lumian was confused.
The woman could only add, "If I knew the key, I would tell you," the lady said. "The sooner I solve this, the sooner I can end this journey." She sighed. "When can I have a work-free vacation..."
Work? Lumian couldn't obtain any inspiration from the mysterious lady, so he probed, "If the padre isn't killed, will time stop repeating itself?"
"No," the lady replied accurately. "There are many trigger points in

the loop, including time reaching the twelfth night. You can figure out the rest yourself."
Twelfth night... There's still quite a bit of time to investigate... Lumian thought for a moment and said, "Because I triggered the specialness in my body, I can maintain my memories and Beyonder characteristics every time I loop, right?"
Seeing the lady nod, he further asked, "So, as long as I'm alive and continue to investigate, I'll be able to find the key to end everything sooner or later?"
This was an application of the "exhaustive method" that Aurore had mentioned.
"In theory, that's right." The woman's emotive eyes, which puzzled Lumian couldn't put his finger on, surfaced again. "But you should have realized that only Cordu and the surrounding area are in a time loop. Time is passing normally in the outside world, and the date is completely different from Cordu's.
"The three investigators will send telegrams to describe their situation and the village, and the officials will sense the abnormality here once they mention the date.
"Even if the investigators fail to send a telegram before the cycle restarts or they don't mention the date, as time passes, the officials will discover the problem. What do you think they will do to resolve the time loop in Cordu?"
Lumian fell silent for a moment before replying, "They'll destroy it directly, just like your alternative choice."
The lady nodded with mixed emotions. "That can effectively prevent the abnormality from spreading and affecting others," she said. "If you have the chance to go to the Sonia Sea in the future, you can ask about Bansy Harbor. It was destroyed by the Church of Storms due to some kind of corruption. No one escaped."
Lumian felt a renewed determination to find the key point of the loop on his own.
He mocked himself, saying, "Looks like I don't have much time left."
He knew he only had three or four more cycles, and he couldn't have it loop to the twelfth night every time.
The lady stood up and calmly said, "At least you still have a chance. Some people don't even have that."
.....
After leaving Ol' Tavern, Lumian stood on the road and looked at the few pedestrians and houses around him. Everything in Cordu Village seemed normal on the surface. The villagers had the same emotions as people everywhere: joy and anger, desire and longing.
However, beneath the peaceful and noisy facade, this village hid

an unimaginable horror. Everyone here had fallen into a loop and lived the same few days over and over again.
Aside from a few people like Padre Guillaume Bénet, Shepherd Pierre Berry, Pons Bénet, and Ava Lizier, Lumian was temporarily unable to determine who was innocent.
He wasn't even 100% sure that Reimund Greg, who was usually rather dim and unscheming, was fine.
The padre's superpower may have influenced the lads' strange behavior at the end of Lent, instead of them having issues beforehand.
For a moment, Lumian felt that Cordu was like a primitive forest, rife with unseen dangers. He couldn't tell who was the prey and who was the hunter.
Caution and patience were most important to survive in such an environment. Ability, courage, wisdom, and experience had to take a backseat.
This was somewhat similar to his vagrant days, yet clearly different.
As these thoughts surfaced, he felt the Hunter potion showing signs of digestion.
This is the first step of the 'acting method'?
That's pretty fast. I thought it would take a month or two to start.
He became excited at the possibility of digesting the Hunter potion.
Can I digest the Hunter potion in one or two cycles?
With the help of dream ruin's hunting, he might quickly become a Sequence 8 Provoker and increase his chances of solving the time loop problem.
Lumian pondered as he walked forward. Soon, he arrived at the village square.
His current plan was to "chat" with the padre to test him for abnormalities and obtain any clues.
As he looked around, he saw a figure walking towards the cathedral.
The figure was wearing a dark brown long coat with a hood, a rope tied around his waist, and a pair of brand new soft leather shoes.
It was Shepherd Pierre Berry.
It's him... Lumian quickly approached Pierre and deliberately asked, "Pierre, why are you back?"
Pierre's black curly hair was greasy, and he hadn't shaved for a long time.
He happily replied, "Isn't Lent almost here? I haven't celebrated it in years. I can't miss it this year no matter what..."
His blue eyes were filled with a gentle smile, and he seemed completely different from the shepherd who had traumatized

Lumian before.
Uh, the answer will be somewhat different from the previous cycle in a different place with a different questioner. Although the essence doesn't change, certain words will be different... Lumian listened carefully and looked at Pierre's new shoes before asking, "Did you make it rich?"
"Not really. I can only say that my current boss is not too shabby. He gave me quite a bit of things. Drinks are on me tonight." Pierre's joy was evident.
"Alright." Lumian agreed and pointed at the cathedral. "Are you going to pray?"
Pierre sighed and said, "Yes, it's been too long since I prayed to God in a cathedral."
Though the sentence didn't seem significant, the more Lumian listened, the more he sensed that something was off.
Shepherds weren't entirely isolated from human settlements. Numerous villages were scattered around the plains and pastures. High mountain meadows might be desolate, but shepherds would occasionally descend the mountain to resupply. *How could he not find a cathedral?*
Indeed, if Pierre Berry had ventured to Feynapotter or Lenburg, locating the Cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun would be a fruitless endeavor. However, Lumian couldn't shake the feeling that there was something amiss in every word Pierre Berry uttered.
Instead, Pierre Berry inquired, "Are you headed to the cathedral as well?"
"No," Lumian replied, shaking his head. "I thought there'd be people chatting in the square, but it was empty."
He then waved his hand.
"I'm going home."
"See you tonight," Pierre Berry responded, waving back.
After watching the shepherd head towards the cathedral, Lumian made his way back to the village.
He decided against having a chat with the padre. His next destination: the home of Shepherd Pierre Berry!

Chapter 38: Sheep

Over a dozen members of the Berry family were crammed into a ramshackle two-story house. Lumian seemed unfazed by the open door and carefully maneuvered around it to the vacant area enclosed by wooden fences at the back.

Piles of hay and firewood were scattered near the eaves of the clearing, and three filthy, white sheep, muddied with dirt, were lingering there.

Lumian remembered Aurore mentioning that the sheep Pierre had hurried back with seemed peculiar, but she couldn't quite pinpoint what was unusual about them. That's why Lumian had taken advantage of the shepherd's absence during prayer at the cathedral to inspect the sheep.

Although he had never herded sheep himself, he had lived near the highland pastures in Cordu, so he had at least encountered 70 to 80 sheep. He was by no means unfamiliar with them.

After observing closely for some time, Lumian couldn't discern any differences between the three sheep before him and others of their kind. All he could do was mutter under his breath, "Can't see any issues with my naked eye—do I need some superpower?"

Sadly, Hunters didn't possess such abilities.

Lumian had already utilized his enhanced vision, sense of smell, and understanding of various clues, but he still couldn't identify any problems.

The only oddity he noticed was that the sheep's droppings were piled in one corner rather than scattered everywhere.

Of course, there was a high probability that the Berry family regularly cleaned the area to use the feces more efficiently.

After several more seconds of observation, Lumian murmured softly, "Looks like just looking and sniffing isn't enough... Do I need to get hands-on?"

Without any hesitation, he placed his hand on the fence and flipped over it, as if he was right at home.

The three sheep turned their heads simultaneously to look at Lumian, who greeted them with a grin.

"Come on, time for a checkup."

He wasn't concerned that their owner would discover his actions since he had done similar things more than once. Every family in the village knew that this guy enjoyed playing pranks in various ways. Using sheep as props was just part of his antics.

In Lumian's own words: When your reputation is already tarnished, there are some perks to being infamous.

With the title of "Prankster King," anything he did in Cordu Village

wouldn't arouse too much suspicion. Even if those who were clearly abnormal caught him red-handed, they wouldn't be able to confirm that something was amiss with him.
Of course, under such circumstances, Padre Guillaume and Shepherd Pierre might try to silence him as a precautionary measure. As such, he needed to exercise caution when necessary.
"Baa! Baa! Baa!"
As if sensing Lumian's ill intentions, the three sheep hid behind the haystack, their cries barely audible.
But how could they escape a Hunter?
Lumian grabbed a sheep and patted its side while forcefully examining its teeth.
"No issues here either..." he whispered.
Seeing the sheep look at him, he added with a wicked grin, "You're in excellent health. You'd probably make a delicious mutton stew with peas."
He deliberately said this to test the intelligence of the three sheep.
When there were no problems with the target's body, he could only start from this angle.
The sheep's eyes glazed over momentarily.
Lumian chuckled.
"Pretty smart, huh? Do you understand what I'm saying?"
The sheep's eyes returned to normal as it turned its head and began eating hay.
"Ignoring me?" Lumian stroked his chin. "I'll buy you from Pierre Berry later and have you for dinner tonight!"
The sheep remained unresponsive.
It bit off a piece of hay and yanked it out.
The haystack suddenly collapsed, and Lumian's sharp Hunter's eyes caught a glimpse of something.
His expression darkened as he walked over and squatted down for a closer inspection.
It was a bundle of black hair containing a few severed fingernails.
"Why would this be outside the house?" Lumian muttered in surprise.
As a native of Cordu, he was well aware of the burial customs of the Dariège region. When someone died at home, their hair and nails had to be cut and hidden somewhere inside the house to maintain their horoscope and good fortune.
How could such an item appear in an outdoor haystack?
Lumian picked up the bundle of hair and nails, weighing it as he examined it.
It looks quite fresh, as if it had been cut only recently... He quickly made a judgment.

However, no one had died in Cordu Village lately!
Lumian could only suspect that this was some form of witchcraft similar to the funeral customs. He planned to consult his sister about it later.
To avoid arousing suspicion, he stuffed the nails and black hair back into the haystack and restored the messy scene.
Having completed that task, he walked towards the wooden fence.
As Lumian took a few steps forward, he turned to look back at the three sheep. With a hopeful attitude, he muttered to himself, "Pierre Berry seems off. He's back in the village before May. Did he commit a crime outside? As a good citizen of Intis and a devout believer of God, should I visit Dariège and inquire around?"
The three sheep just stared at him, unresponsive and unchanged.
Lumian sighed inwardly, feeling disappointed. These sheep aren't particularly intelligent, he thought.
He then raised his hands—thumbs pointing up, index fingers pointing down—making a gesture of disdain.
What's wrong with mocking the sheep when I'm in a bad mood?
Suddenly, the sheep that Lumian had examined took a few steps forward, looking hopeful.
It raised its hoof and started drawing on the mud.
Lumian was momentarily stunned, but soon approached the sheep to see what it was drawing.
The sheep seemed to be drawing letters on the ground. Lumian found them familiar but didn't recognize them.
He frowned and speculated, This language should have the same origin as the Intis language... But I only know Intis and some ancient Feysac languages...
At that moment, Lumian realized the significance of Aurore's words: "knowledge equals power."
The sheep finished drawing and took a step back, looking at Lumian with sincerity in its eyes. The other two sheep also had a similar emotional change and bleated softly.
Lumian looked at the word on the ground and fell into deep thought, wondering what it meant and how he should respond.
In just a second or two, he had an idea and nodded solemnly at the three sheep.
He stretched out his right foot and wiped away the word on the soil.
He may not understand, but he could pretend to understand it!
He would trick the sheep for now and ask his sister for guidance later.
Without waiting for the sheep to 'respond,' he nodded slowly with a heavy and thoughtful expression as he walked towards the

fence, as if saying, "Be patient, I'll figure something out."
After leaving the sheep pen, Lumian didn't waste any time and went straight home. He found Aurore reading on a recliner in the study.
"Grande Soeur," he called out anxiously, "there's something."
Aurore immediately raised her guard. "Calling me Grande Soeur... What kind of trouble did you get into this time?"
Lumian took a deep breath and organized his thoughts.
"Remember when you said there was something off about Shepherd Pierre Berry's three sheep?
"Well, I went to the back of his house to take a look while he was praying in the cathedral. And guess what I found?"
Aurore's expression turned serious.
"If you're going to do something like that, you need to tell me in advance. It's dangerous now, and no one will protect you."
Lumian felt touched by his sister's concern but complained, If I told you in advance, you probably wouldn't have let me go...
"I'll keep it in mind for next time," he promised sincerely.
He had said similar words dozens of times.
Aurore understood the urgency of the situation and nodded, indicating that Lumian could tell her what he had discovered.
Lumian quickly recounted his experience in the sheep pen. The more Aurore listened, the more serious she became.
"Write down that word," she said, getting up from the recliner and finding a pen and paper to hand to Lumian.
Lumian had memorized the word, so he quickly wrote it down on the paper.
Aurore took a quick glance and said solemnly, "This is a big problem."
I know... Lumian responded inwardly.
Moreover, he believed the problem was even bigger than his sister had imagined.
"What's the problem?" he asked.
Aurore pointed at the word and said, "This is Highlander, the official language of the Feynapotter Kingdom. Like Intis, it comes from ancient Feysac.
"It means..."
Aurore paused for a moment, then spoke in a deep voice, "Help!"
"Help?" Lumian blurted out in surprise. "The sheep are asking us for help?"
Aurore tersely acknowledged, "I suspect they're not really sheep. They were probably humans!"
"Humans?" Lumian asked in shock.
This was beyond the scope of what he knew.

Before, Lumian had only thought that the three sheep were intelligent and had human-like emotions. They also seemed to have mastered some human language, but he had never thought of them as actual humans.
To him, turning into a sheep only happened in imaginative stories!
Just as he said that, Lumian was no longer shocked.
He realized that a time loop had already happened. *What was so strange about people turning into sheep?*
In the world of mysticism, there were plenty of bizarre and absurd things.
Aurore solemnly nodded at her brother's confusion and said, "I'm not sure if there's a secret art that can turn a person into a sheep, but all the details now point to that possibility."
"Indeed," Lumian echoed.
The more he thought about it, the more he felt that the three sheep were probably humans.
Did this mean that the shepherd, Pierre Berry, was actually grazing humans?
Lumian then asked, "Why were those nails and hair hidden outside the house?"
Aurore pursed her lips and said, "This is one of the funerary customs of the Dariège region. However, it's not used under normal circumstances. Many people have forgotten about it.
"As a Warlock, I've studied this aspect to see if I could obtain some useful knowledge."
She then explained, "When a family member commits suicide or is murdered by a relative, or if they had a bad character while alive and exerted a negative influence on the entire family, the hair and nails that are cut after death have to be hidden outside the house to prevent the family's horoscope from being affected and bringing them bad luck."
Suicide or murder by a relative? Lumian suddenly thought of something.
During the last cycle, Pons Bénet entered Naroka's house without adhering to the funeral customs.
Could he have gone to take away Naroka's hair and nails?

Chapter 39: Sick

If Pons Bénet had really entered Naroka's house to take away her hair and nails, there's a high chance that Naroka had been murdered by a relative. After all, Naroka had a good reputation and was the pillar of the entire family. Furthermore, she was relatively healthy, both physically and mentally, so it was unlikely that she had committed suicide. Lumian quickly came up with a series of speculations.

But if Naroka had really been murdered by a relative, what was the reason?

Seeing that her brother was deep in thought and hadn't spoken for a long time, Aurore thought that he was frightened by the idea of "humans turning into sheep" and "someone from the Berry family dying from murder". So she comforted him gently.

"Although the matter is serious, it doesn't affect us yet.

"I need to reflect on such matters. It's easy for you to panic when you encounter something similar if you're always prohibited from coming into contact with real mysticism. Hmm, the frequency of supernatural events has been increasing in recent years, and I can't be by your side at all times. You'll grow up and have your own life..."

Lumian inwardly retorted that he had never heard of someone having to leave the family when they grew up.

He could feel that Aurore's attitude toward him coming into contact with mysticism had loosened up due to the matter of humans turning into sheep.

If I work harder, I can directly tell her that I've become a Beyonder... Lumian thought, but before he could speak, Aurore had already made her decision.

"Go pack your bags now. We'll leave Cordu immediately using Novel Weekly's invitation. We're really lucky. They sent us a telegram at the critical moment so that we can leave openly without being suspected. When we're on our journey, I'll teach you some true mysticism, but don't even think about becoming a Beyonder. It's too dangerous."

Lumian silently muttered to himself, We're not lucky. I sent the telegram because I discovered the problem. We only received a reply in this cycle. But he was pleased that his sister was still the same decisive person.

Although he didn't think they could successfully leave Cordu Village or escape the loop, he had to try.

"Uh, aren't we going to save those three sheep—three people?" Lumian asked.

Aurore shook her head.
"This could trigger a conflict between us and Pierre Berry, and I'm not sure how strong he is or how many helpers he has. It's too dangerous to save others without knowing anything.
"It's better to let the officials do it. This is their duty. When we reach Dariège and buy steam locomotive tickets, we'll send an anonymous letter to the officials and let them handle it."
"But what if they don't believe us?" Lumian deliberately pressed.
Aurore smiled.
"In terms of mysticism, you are indeed illiterate. In the letter, we'll describe the matter of turning people into sheep clearly. They will naturally find professionals to perform divination. Even if they don't obtain any detailed revelations, they will discover that there's something abnormal about Cordu."
"Got it," Lumian said, and he went upstairs to pack his bags.
Not long after, the siblings each came down with a brown suitcase.
Aurore looked out the door and said, "Let's go to Madame Pualis and borrow her carriage to reach Dariège as quickly as possible."
An ordinary person had to walk an entire afternoon from Cordu Village to Dariège. As a Hunter, Lumian didn't need to, but in Aurore's eyes, he wasn't a Beyonder yet.
After hesitating whether he should take the opportunity to confess to his sister, he realized that it was impossible for him to escape from Cordu. He might as well take the opportunity to search Madame Pualis's house for clues. Lumian tersely acknowledged, "Will do," and reached out to take his sister's suitcase. With two pieces of luggage in hand, he headed for the door.
Aurore nodded in satisfaction and relief, but then she said in puzzlement, "Your strength has increased. You're carrying it so easily."
She subconsciously wanted to raise her right hand and rub the sides of her eyes, but Lumian had already left. She could only give up and quickly follow.
On the way to the administrator's residence, many villagers saw Aurore leaving with her luggage and asked about the situation curiously.
Aurore, who had a valid reason, was very calm about this.
On the other hand, Lumian came up with seven or eight stories to deal with the different villagers: something about Aurore getting the Intis Legion of Honor medal and going to Trier to be honored, something about him being specially recruited by Trier Normal College and being able to be matriculated, or something about Aurore going bankrupt from investing in stocks with her creditors

about to come knocking on her door, leaving her with no choice but to flee to other places. The ignorant villagers were stunned when they heard this, but thanks to Lumian's reputation, they chose not to believe him after coming back to their senses.
Not long after, the siblings arrived in front of the black building that had been transformed from an ancient castle.
Looking up at the two tall towers, Lumian smiled and said, "I wonder what's inside. Aurore, have you ever been inside?"
"Why would I wander around someone else's house?" Aurore rolled her eyes at her brother.
Lumian muttered softly, "I thought Madame Pualis would invite you to tour the castle. Don't people like them like to show their guests their big houses and precious collections?"
"What's there to see..." Aurore's voice became softer and softer as she thought about how this would be of great help to her description of a castle in her works. "Sigh, let's talk about it in the future. I wonder if we can still return to Cordu."
She then led Lumian through the colorful garden towards the castle door.
After taking a few steps, Aurore slowed down and looked around. She remarked in puzzlement, "The flowers in this garden bloomed very early..."
Cordu Village was in the mountains, and there was a highlander pasture nearby. Normally, the first wave of spring flowers would only appear in mid-to-late April.
"Perhaps Madame Pualis's gardener has a special method," Lumian said. He recalled that Madame Pualis was a Beyonder of an abnormal pathway and suspected that this was related to some supernatural phenomenon, but he couldn't say it out loud.
Aurore was just making an offhand remark, so she didn't think too deeply about it. They arrived at the castle and received a warm welcome from Madame Pualis.
The lady was wearing a blue corset dress today, and there was still a diamond necklace inlaid with gold hanging over her chest. Her long brown hair was half tied up, the rest cascading down, making her look even younger than usual.
She sat on an armchair in the small living room and quietly listened to Aurore's request. She smiled and said,
"You don't have to be so polite. We're friends."
Heh... Lumian mocked in his heart.
Who would introduce crappy marriage partners to a friend?
But he quickly saw Madame Pualis looking at him with a smile in her bright brown eyes.
He suddenly recalled their previous conversation and felt

uncomfortable.
"Alright," Aurore said helplessly.
Every time she borrowed a carriage, she would offer to pay for it, but Madame Pualis would always refuse. So she would usually bring some gifts for the lady on the way back, which were neither expensive nor cheap, and also give the carriage driver a tip.
While waiting for the carriage driver to prepare, Madame Pualis invited the siblings to taste some desserts made by her own chef.
Lumian tasted a muffin and looked around.
"Where's Mr. Lund?"
Louis Lund was Administrator Béost's butler. He had followed him from Dariège to Cordu Village.
Lumian had evidence that he had an affair with a woman in the village and had sold some of the castle's items secretly. This was how he got the news that Madame Pualis was the mistress of the padre.
Chancing upon the padre and Madame Pualis having an affair in the cathedral? That was a lie for the foreigners!
At this moment, Lumian was looking for Louis Lund to curse him, saying, "You son of a b*tch, why didn't you tell me that Madame Pualis is a Warlock?"
Madame Pualis sighed.
"Louis is sick. He's resting in his room."
Sick? For some reason, Lumian felt that there might be a problem.
While his sister was chatting with Madame Pualis, he excused himself to go to the washroom, walked out of the living room, and went straight to the stairs.
This castle was huge, and the couple didn't bring many servants with them. It looked empty everywhere, and one could even hear echoes when walking in certain places. This gave Lumian better conditions to infiltrate.
Relying on his powerful senses, he easily dodged a valet and a maid. With light footsteps, he arrived at the second floor and found Louis Lund's room.
He was in no hurry to knock. He turned his head and pressed his ear to the wood.
"Ah!"
"Ah!"
...
Sounds of a man screaming in pain came from the room.
Is he really sick? It sounds quite serious... Lumian thought for a moment and walked to the side. He opened the door of the other servants—Administrator Béost and Madame Pualis lived on the third floor.

After darting into the room, he gently closed the wooden door, took a few steps to the other side, and pushed open the glass window.
Lumian looked down and saw that no one was around. He immediately propped himself up with both hands and nimbly flipped over, "hanging" on the outer wall of the castle.
Then, he leaped lightly like a wild cat and silently landed on Butler Louis Lund's windowsill.
Lumian stood at the edge of the glass window, turned his body, and secretly looked into the room.
He saw Louis Lund lying naked on the bed, his belly bulging, giving the impression that he might burst at any moment.
Seeing that the butler's black hair was drenched in sweat and his face was grimacing with pain, Lumian couldn't help but frown when he heard his tragic cries from time to time.
What kind of illness is this?
It looks scary. A stomach can actually grow so big...
At this moment, a woman in her forties stood beside Louis Lund's bed.
She had brown hair and brown eyes. She was pretty and didn't have many wrinkles. She wore a grayish-white dress and was shouting excitedly at Louis Lund.
"Soon, soon."
What's happening soon? Just as this thought flashed through Lumian's mind, he heard a scream and saw something holding up Louis Lund's stomach.
In the blink of an eye, that spot had burst open. Louis Lund's stomach had burst!
A small, bloody hand reached out.
"It's born! It's born!" The woman shouted happily.
She then leaned down and took out a wrinkled, dirty, and bloody baby from Louis Lund's stomach.
Lumian was stunned.
"..."

Chapter 40: On the Carriage

Compared to the "time loop" and "humans becoming sheep," the scene in front of him was no less shocking. It made Lumian feel as though his eyes, mind, and spirit had been severely tainted.

If he had known beforehand that he would witness such a thing, he would definitely have abandoned his actions.

*What the f*ck is going on?*

Louis Lund is clearly still a man!

Whose child is he carrying? The administrator's? Or Madame Pualis?

Is this the world of mysticism?

Aurore didn't let me come into contact with this for my own good...

For a moment, Lumian's thoughts were disordered, and his mind was in a state of chaos. He wished he could dig out his eyes and forcefully forget what he had seen.

"Waa! Waa! Waa!"

The baby that Louis Lund had given birth to cried out, making the filthy "delivery room" instantly have a holy aura.

This was the beauty of a new life. Lumian, who was hiding outside the window, directly experienced the joy of human origins.

Of course, besides that, the strange, absurd, dirty, and disharmonious feeling became even more obvious.

Lumian finally came back to his senses and subconsciously looked into the room again.

The baby had already been placed on a white silk cloth beside Louis Lund by the woman in the grayish-white dress. The baby was a boy, and there was more blood than milky-white fat, but other than that, there was nothing abnormal. He looked like an ordinary newborn.

Lumian observed for another two seconds and realized that the baby boy's ten fingers were bent. His nails were very long, like the claws of a bird.

Just now, he had used these hands to rip open Louis Lund's stomach!

Louis Lund, on the other hand, lay in a semi-conscious state.

The wound on Louis Lund's stomach had yet to be stitched up, and blood kept seeping out. One could vaguely see the intestines pressed to the side and a strange, bird's nest-like thing covered in a flesh-colored membrane.

As the woman wrapped the baby in silk, she picked up a sewing needle and catgut, and began chanting as she sewed the groaning Louis Lund's wound, "This was quite easy for you. The last time I

gave birth to quadruplets, that was considered painful..."
Lumian's facial muscles twitched slightly. He felt that after his eyes, brain, mind, and spirit were affected, his ears were also tainted.
He retracted his gaze. He had to get out of there, fast.
He leaped back to the window he had come from and flipped into the room.
After closing the window, he rushed out the door and headed straight for the stairs.
After dodging a male servant, Lumian tiptoed and quickly returned to the hall.
"Where did you go?"
Suddenly, a slightly magnetic and gentle voice sounded in his ears.
Even with Lumian's Hunter senses, he didn't sense that someone was standing beside the staircase entrance.
He turned around to see Madame Pualis in a blue corset, her hair half-tied, and her bright brown eyes reflecting his figure.
The madam no longer had a smile on her face. Her eyes reflected Lumian's figure with a piercing intensity.
Lumian's mind tensed up. He was terrified, but prepared to fight if necessary.
Aurore appeared from a side room and asked, "Where did you go? The carriage has been waiting at the entrance."
Having been in a similar situation, the experienced Lumian said half-truthfully, "Didn't Madame Pualis say that Mr. Lund is sick? I had drinks with Mr. Lund and wanted to visit him, but this castle is too big. I couldn't find his room."
Aurore nodded and said, "You could have asked Madame Pualis directly. You don't have to hide it from us. It's not a bad thing."
"My bad. I'm sorry." Lumian looked at Madame Pualis sincerely.
After seeing the scene upstairs, Lumian was more afraid of this lady than disgusted.
He was relieved when she finally smiled, no longer as serious as before.
"Let me thank you on behalf of Lund for your kindness, but he isn't in the best of health. He isn't willing to appear in front of others in that unseemly manner."
It's indeed unseemly... Lumian silently echoed her thoughts.
"Shall we board the carriage? Thank you so much," Aurore said to Madame Pualis.
Lumian watched Madame Pualis closely, afraid she would find a way to make them stay longer.
If she did, it could mean that she sensed something had happened with Louis Lund!

Although Lumian felt that their combined forces could fight against Madame Pualis after he rendezvoused with his sister, this was her castle after all, surrounded by her servants. It was the worst hunting environment for a Hunter.
Madame Pualis nodded and smiled at Aurore.
"I look forward to the gifts you bring back from Trier. I always yearn for what's trending there."
"I hope I can give you a surprise," Aurore replied, though she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to return to Cordu Village. She just needed to keep up appearances.
Madame Pualis walked the siblings to the door with her lady's maid, Cathy, and watched them get into the four-seater carriage.
The burly, brown-bearded carriage driver wore dark red clothes, yellow pants, and a waxed hat. He looked almost like a professional coachman in the city, except that he didn't wear a tie.
This was a mandatory request from Administrator Béost.
Aurore apologized to the driver. "Sorry to trouble you," she said politely before closing the door.
The driver's name was Sewell, and he had the most common blue eyes in the Intis Republic.
He was delighted by Aurore's politeness and looked forward to the tip he'd receive when they arrived in Dariège.
"Madame, Monsieur, sit tight."
He raised his whip, and the horses started to speed up.
As the carriage passed through Cordu Village, it suddenly stopped.
Lumian's heart skipped a beat, knowing that their journey wouldn't be smooth and easy.
"What's wrong?" he asked the driver, Sewell.
Sewell explained, "Madame promised to send Naroka to Junak Village yesterday. I'm worried I won't be able to return in time after going to Dariège, so I thought of picking her up on the way. Don't worry, it won't cause any delays."
Junak Village was closer to Dariège than Cordu Village. Going there first really didn't affect the estimated time of arrival for Aurore and Lumian.
Aurore had no right to object since this wasn't her carriage, so she didn't.
Lumian was more concerned about Naroka's safety. In the previous cycle, she had died under suspicious circumstances, possibly at the hands of a relative. It was related to the padre's group.
Sewell went into Naroka's house before helping her out.
Naroka was different from usual. She was dressed in a long black dress with exquisite patterns and a dark bonnet. Her sparse, pale

hair was carefully combed.
"Hey, my little cabbages, where are you going?" Naroka asked happily as she got into the carriage.
Her pockmarked and wrinkled face was filled with unconcealable joy, and her previously slightly turbid eyes were much more energetic.
Aurore told her the truth. "I'm going to Trier to attend an author salon, and also bring Lumian to check out the universities there."
Aurore asked Naroka, "Did you receive some invitation?"
While it was normal for Naroka to wear black clothes as a widow, she only wore this dress during festivals, banquets, and the anniversary of her late husband's death.
Naroka looked expectant.
"Yeah, to meet some people."
Lumian quietly observed Naroka, trying to see if he could detect anything from her.
The carriage started moving again, leaving Cordu Village behind.
Aurore chatted with Naroka intermittently, keeping an eye on the outside of the carriage.
Aurore worried that their sudden departure might arouse suspicion.
As they continued on, Lumian sensed a change in Naroka's demeanor.
She looked much paler than before, and her eyes lacked their usual liveliness. She only spoke when spoken to.
This was very similar to the Naroka Lumian had seen in the middle of the night during the previous cycle.
Lumian discreetly tugged on Aurore's hand to get her attention.
Aurore turned to him, silently asking what was wrong.
Lumian discreetly pointed at Naroka and drew a cross on her palm, a symbol Aurore often used to indicate an error in her scripts. He used it to refer to Naroka's concerning state.
Aurore was momentarily stunned but quickly understood what Lumian meant.
She turned her attention to Naroka, sensing that something was wrong.
Aurore raised her hand to massage her temples, causing her light-blue eyes to darken and become deeper.
With just a glance, Aurore's golden brows furrowed, and she leaned back slightly as if she had been hit by something.
She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, as if she was feeling tired and in pain.
When she opened her eyes again, Aurore turned to Lumian and said, "When we reach Darième, you must stay close to me. No

matter what happens, don't leave my side."
Her tone was serious, and Lumian understood immediately. He knew that if something happened, he had to follow his sister closely. She would take care of it.
He nodded solemnly and decided to tell Aurore about his recent Beyonder powers later.
Aurore turned her attention back to Naroka and asked, "Are you really going to Junak, or somewhere else?"
She was worried that an unexpected stop might make things more complicated. It was better to anticipate any developments and not fight in an environment the other party was expecting.
Naroka's gaze was vacant as she replied in a deep voice, "No, I'm not going to Junak. I want to go to Paramita."
As she spoke, Lumian noticed the outside of the carriage window darkening abnormally.

Chapter 41: Undead

What's Paramita? Lumian was alarmed as he quickly turned to look out the window.

But what he saw outside was not what he expected. Instead of mountains, pastures, and trees, he was greeted by a desolate wilderness. The pale-white clouds in the sky blocked out all the sunlight, casting everything in shadow.

In the wilderness, strange figures roamed about. Most of them wore white linen clothes, with pale-blue faces, empty eyes, and agape mouths, looking anything but normal.

Lumian watched in horror as some of the figures ran crazily towards the edge of the wilderness, while others stumbled towards them from the other side. It was as if they would never stop, doomed to wander aimlessly forever.

At the edge of the wilderness, near a cliff, he could make out dark monsters with long horns and humanoid bodies, grabbing the white-clad figures and throwing them over the edge.

Suddenly, a blood-curdling scream pierced the air, right into Lumian's and Aurore's ears.

The sound of hooves echoed through the wilderness as a tall figure in full black armor rode a white horse. The horse was so thin that it looked like it had only skin and bones left. The rider moved slowly at times and galloped back and forth at others, as if shepherding sheep.

Lumian's eyesight was sharp, and he could see the rider clearly from afar.

Inside the helmet that shone with a metallic luster, two deep red rays of light flickered like flames. A hideous wound on the rider's neck extended all the way to their navel, almost splitting them in half and dragging out their pale-white intestines.

Without any need for further evidence, Lumian knew who it was: a Death Knight!

It was a creature that often appeared in Intisian folklore.

Suddenly, the carriage they were in came to a stop.

Naroka silently opened the door and stepped out.

Her pale face, empty eyes, and numb expression were starting to resemble the figures in white linen clothes that Lumian had seen earlier.

Aurore turned to him and said in a deep voice, "This place is filled with undead. You must stay by my side at all times."

As she spoke, she took out a gold brooch and fastened it to her clothing.

Aurore took out a handful of grayish-black powder from her pocket

with her other hand.
Lumian leaned forward to look at the carriage driver and realized that Sewell had become like Naroka—pale-faced and empty-eyed, slowly walking deeper into the wilderness as if he had been dead for a long time.
He said quickly to Aurore, "Grande Soeur, I'm already a Beyonder. You deal with these undead. I'll drive the carriage and get us out of here as soon as possible!"
He knew he couldn't fight the undead, so he could only be a temporary carriage driver.
But if the Death Knight showed up, he would do his best to block it.
Aurore was taken aback by Lumian's sudden transformation, but quickly regained her composure. She reminded him, "Check the horses' condition!"
Lumian looked ahead and saw that the horses were motionless, with their flesh and blood seemingly extracted, leaving only withered fur and skin wrapped around their bones.
"The horses are dead," he reported back to Aurore.
Suddenly, the undead caught a whiff of the living and rushed towards the carriage, trying to enter.
"XXX." Aurore uttered a word in a language Lumian didn't understand.
As soon as Aurore spoke the word, the golden brooch in front of her lit up with a violent but not stimulating golden light.
The grayish-black powder in her left hand burned, emitting a flow of light that resembled water, spreading in all directions. The undead screamed as soon as they came into contact with the light, and cyan smoke rose from their bodies.
They wanted to retreat, but more undead surged forward, squeezing around the carriage, evaporating and disappearing.
Lumian watched enviously and solemnly, wishing he could do something to help. He yearned to advance in Sequence and gain more abilities.
But the powder in Aurore's hand was about to run out, and the undead were still coming, ignoring the ones that had already been destroyed. Lumian knew they couldn't stay there forever.
"We can't stay here. Let's make a run for it!"
No matter how many materials his sister had prepared, she couldn't deal with so many undead!
The Death Knight and the creatures that looked like demons were still out there.
Their best chance was to use what resources they had left to escape from the wilderness known as Paramita.
Aurore nodded and said simply, "Follow me."

The moment she finished speaking, the grayish-black powder in her palm vanished into thin air, and the desolate surroundings were engulfed by the undead.
Aurore wasted no time and retrieved another handful of materials, igniting them with the golden brooch before her. The materials combusted, creating a dazzling golden light
that decimated the approaching undead. Their agonizing shrieks echoed through the wilderness before they disintegrated into nothingness.
Aurore leaped off the carriage with Lumian hot on her heels, sprinting towards the nearest edge of the wilderness.
Suddenly, a hand jutted out from the golden blaze, snatching Lumian's arm.
Lumian's instincts kicked in, alerting him of the imminent threat. He pivoted his forearm and delivered a swift blow to the hand.
Pa!
It felt like he had punched a block of solid ice. A shiver ran through his body, rendering him immobile for a moment.
Lumian's teeth clattered as he caught sight of the hand's owner.
It was another undead clad in white linen, but it donned a mask made of white paper over its face. The figure disintegrated slowly under the golden light.
The peculiar undead lunged towards Lumian, but before it could make contact, a beam of pure, holy light descended upon it.
The masked undead halted in its tracks, burning fiercely before dissolving into black vapor.
"Keep moving!" Aurore shouted, withdrawing her hand from the golden brooch and darting forward.
Lumian shook off the cold and picked up his pace to follow his sister.
The duo relied on the grayish-black powder and Warlock spells to traverse the wilderness. The golden light eradicated countless undead garbed in white linen.
Unfortunately, Aurore couldn't simply rely on one material to stuff every bag. As a Warlock, she had to anticipate various scenarios.
Before long, the bag containing the Sun Flower powder was empty, and they were still hundreds of meters away from the wilderness's edge. The undead horde seemed never-ending.
What frightened them even more was the Death Knight's approach. The horse-mounted knight had sensed the turmoil and was galloping towards them.
Aurore's expression changed several times in the golden light. She slowed down, gritted her teeth, and spoke urgently to Lumian.
"When I shout 'three,' run towards the edge of the wilderness and

don't look back!"
Lumian opened his mouth to protest, but Aurore cut him off.
"Don't worry, I'll follow you. If you stay, you'll only interfere with my use of a powerful spell and slow us down when we try to escape."
As she spoke, Aurore removed the golden brooch from her chest and handed it to Lumian, giving him instructions.
"Focus your spirituality and extend it to this brooch. Repeat this word when you're running: 'XXX'!"
Lumian didn't understand the word, but he committed the pronunciation to memory.
As soon as he took hold of the golden brooch, he felt a warm light envelop his body, banishing his dark thoughts and slowing down his racing mind.
Instinctively donning the brooch, Lumian concentrated his thoughts according to his sister's directions, extending his spiritual energy.
Seeing that the grayish-black powder in her hand was running low, Aurore retrieved another material and shouted out, "One, two, three!"
In order to avoid slowing down his sister, Lumian sprinted wildly towards the edge of the wilderness, shouting the word Aurore had given him with all his might.
"XXX!"
The golden brooch emitted a golden, radiant glow, illuminating Lumian as though a miniature sun was hanging on his chest. The undead in his path instinctively avoided him.
Thud thud thud!
As he ran, Lumian couldn't shake his worry for his sister. He cast a glance back at Aurore, who remained in her spot surrounded by a cloud of black gas.
The undead were drawn to the gas, abandoning Lumian to swarm towards her.
Lumian wasn't a fool. When he saw this scene, he understood that his sister was lying when she said that she would follow him.
"Aurore!"
He shouted, halted abruptly and spun around, running back towards his sister.
Aurore looked back and saw that he had stopped. She hurriedly shouted, "Are you stupid? Run!"
Lumian didn't say anything and ran towards Aurore. The undead parted before him, clearing a path under the golden light of the brooch.
Seeing this, Aurore lowered her head and cursed softly, "What an

idiot..."
She then took out another iron-black substance and sprinkled it on Lumian, causing him to be pushed to the edge of the wilderness by an invisible force.
He struggled to break free, but he was in midair with no point of leverage.
"My stupid brother, live well..." Aurore whispered with a melancholic smile before the black aura consumed her completely.
She was directly exposed to countless figures and the Death Knight.
"Aurore!"
Lumian's eyes bulged with terror, his skin and eyes turning red with blood vessels.
However, he was still pushed to the edge of the wilderness.
But suddenly, all the undead stopped in their tracks.
Something was happening in the distance.
Aurore sensed the shift and looked up in shock. She saw an open carriage passing by, pulled not by horses, but by two demonic creatures with goat horns. The carriage was a deep red color, resembling a conch or a cradle, and a woman resembling Madame Pualis wearing a flower crown and green dress sat inside.
But unlike Madame Pualis, she was very dignified.
The Death Knight abandoned his target and turned his horse towards the carriage.
All the undead followed suit, clustering around the carriage as it headed towards the hazy mountain range beyond the wilderness.

Chapter 42: Madame Night

Lumian was stunned by the carriage pulled by the 'demon' and the undead's reactions. He forgot to struggle and got pushed by the invisible palm for over ten seconds before coming to a stop.

Although the carriage was getting farther away, he could still see the woman's face clearly with his eagle-like vision.

Her long brown hair was tied up high, and her brown eyes were beautiful and bright. She had light eyebrows and wore a fresh green dress and a laurel crown made of flowers. She had an elegant and dignified aura.

Madame Pualis! Lumian's first thought was that the woman on the carriage was Madame Pualis—the administrator's wife and the padre's mistress.

However, on closer inspection, he noticed an obvious difference between the two. Not only was there a vast disparity in their aura, but there was also a distinct difference in their looks.

The lady in the car had softer and more mature facial features.

If Lumian had to make a comparison, he would describe the lady in the car as Madame Pualis's older sister by seven or eight years.

At the moment, the lady sat in an open carriage pulled by the 'demon.' Surrounded by countless undead and the Death Knight, she traveled towards the distant forest as if she was on some kind of magical patrol.

Aurore retracted her gaze and ran towards Lumian. As she ran, she shouted, "Take this opportunity to escape from here!"

Lumian snapped out of his daze and waited for his sister to catch up before taking large strides and fleeing to the edge of the nearest wilderness.

Before long, they felt as though they had passed through an illusory curtain or a thick layer of water.

The scene before them changed.

The wilderness dissipated like bubbles. The clear river, new grass on both sides, and green trees all entered their view at once.

To Lumian and Aurore, this scene was so familiar that they didn't need to identify it to make a judgment.

They were still near Cordu Village!

This was where Ava Lizier used to tend to her geese!

"We're back..." Lumian wasn't surprised or disappointed. Instead, he looked around, having confirmed his suspicion.

Aurore panted and said, "Whether Madame Pualis made a mistake on purpose or not, we can't go back to the village now."

"Let's head to Darième!" Lumian suggested immediately.

"Then let's go to the nearest pasture. There's a dangerous path

down the hill. With our abilities, we'll be fine," Lumian added.
"Okay." Aurore turned around and started running.
Having borrowed the pony from Madame Pualis from time to time, she was familiar with the highland pastures around Cordu.
Lumian followed his sister closely, both glad and terrified at what had just happened.
He didn't expect Madame Pualis to be so powerful that she could have so many undead, the 'demon,' and the Death Knight chase after her.
Of course, it might not be Madame Pualis.
As she ran, Aurore slowed down. Her breathing became heavier, and her gasping became more and more pronounced.
"What's wrong?" Lumian still had plenty of energy.
This was one of the benefits of being a Hunter.
Aurore stopped and panted heavily.
"I'm exhausted. The spellcasting took up a lot of my energy."
Lumian said without hesitation, "Then I'll carry you. I'm not tired yet."
They were in a dire situation, and time was of the essence. Aurore nodded, went behind the squatting Lumian, and leaned on him.
Lumian first took off the brooch in front of him and returned it to his sister. Then, he straightened his body and ran again.
"Is this a mystical item?" Lumian still had the energy to ask.
Aurore was taken aback for a moment before she chuckled.
"Looks like you know quite a bit. This is indeed a mystical item. I call it the Integrity Brooch. It can create Holy sunlight or help me ignite materials to help me use a mystic technique to deal with ghost-type creatures. However, wearing it for too long will cause people to become fanatical. And as long as you wear it, you will lose some thoughts. As you know, immoral methods in battle might be more useful, but you get limited by it."
Aurore paused and asked in a deep voice, "Where did you get the Beyonder characteristic?"
As Lumian ran, he replied intermittently, "Didn't that Wand card allow me to stay awake in the dream?"
"What Wand card?" Aurore was confused.
Oh, this is something from the previous cycle... Lumian reorganized his words.
"I was at Ol' Tavern and met a mysterious lady. She gave me a Wand card. With that card, I stayed lucid in my dream and entered a strange space. There, I encountered some monsters and obtained a Hunter Beyonder characteristic."
"Hunter..." Aurore was familiar with this Sequence commonly seen in Intis.

As she muttered to herself, she suddenly chuckled, seeming to have thought of something.
What are you laughing at... Lumian was baffled.
Aurore asked again, "Then who gave you the formula? That mysterious lady?"
"Yeah." Lumian nodded as he ran.
Aurore sighed and said, "My stupid brother has his own secrets now... I can't confirm if what you said is true or not. I'll just take it at face value."
Lumian couldn't bear to see his sister disappointed, so he quickly changed the topic.
"Was that Madame Pualis on the carriage?"
"They look alike, but they're not the same," Aurore said, contradicting herself.
After a few seconds of deliberation, she said, "Since you're already a Beyonder, I'll tell you directly. My companions, uh, my pen pals, once mentioned something.
"They said that in the past few years, there have been many strange phenomena similar to what happened just now in the southern parts of Loen, the southern parts of Intis, and the Feynapotter Kingdom. Women ride carriages pulled by demons, patrol the wilderness and have hordes of undead following them. Some Beyonders who have grasped the corresponding mystic arts will let their spirits leave their bodies and follow the carriage for a period of time to experience something wonderful and obtain mystic knowledge.
"One of my companions obtained one of the Beyonders' notebooks. It mentioned that the lady's name is Madame Night. The owner of the notebook obtained a secret medicine production method from his experience following a carriage, which can create an invisibility potion from a baby's corpse.
"According to the investigation, the women in different places exhibit similar phenomena, but things happen at night."
Lumian said in surprise, "But it's daytime now."
Could the anomaly in Cordu Village have brought about a change?
"That's why I'm not sure," Aurore said after thinking for a moment. "Perhaps sending Naroka to Paramita made a difference. Perhaps that wilderness is Paramita, where Madame Nights patrol in the day and appear in the human world at night. Yes, combined with the fact that the lady resembles Pualis, I'm inclined to the previous guess."
Lumian didn't know much about mysticism, but he instinctively felt that his sister's suspicion was right.
He ran in silence for a distance before finally asking, "Why did you

sacrifice yourself to save me? I wish you were more selfish."
"I'm very selfish," Aurore said with a smile. "I considered abandoning you and escaping on my own. Then, I would avenge you when I became stronger. However, after careful consideration, I realized that even if I gave you the Integrity Brooch and taught you how to use it, you wouldn't be able to help me attract most of the undead to give me a chance to escape. Only a Warlock like me could do it.
"It was a choice between us dying together or at least you being able to live. I don't have to tell you the choice I made, right?"
Making such a choice isn't as easy as how you make it sound. Lumian could accept it rationally, but not emotionally.
He said gloomily, "We might as well die together."
"You can't die! Who'll bring me back if you're gone? Anything's possible in the world of mysticism," lectured Aurore to her brother. "That's why I said all those sappy lines. So you'll remember to work hard and bring me back."
That's true... Lumian gradually agreed with his sister's choice.
After running for a while, they saw the nearest highland pasture. Lumian, who had been carrying Aurore, clearly felt tired, but he didn't stop to rest. He mustered his remaining strength and rushed to the hill covered in green grass.
There were many livestock pens and shacks here. The former was surrounded by rocks and tree branches. The ground was compacted soil and flattened feces. There was a long and narrow exit at one end that could only allow one sheep to pass through. The latter was similar to a primitive tent: stones were first used to build a circle of low walls, leaving a door and a smoke vent. Then, a row of grates were built against the low walls. The bottom half of the grates was buried in the soil, and the upper end supported a wooden structure. On the wooden structure was a roof made of grass and mud.
This was where the shepherds lived. The environment was very harsh.
Lumian no longer carried Aurore and led her all the way to the other side of the hill.
The dangerous path was hidden below.
Looking at the path that required her to jump seven to eight meters off a cliff, Aurore said to Lumian, "Although you can climb this now, don't waste time. I'll fly you down."
"Alright." Lumian wanted to see what kind of changes would happen if he left Cordu.
Aurore grabbed Lumian's arm with one hand and sprinkled silver dust with the other.

The two of them floated up at the same time and slowly flew down the cliff.
In midair, Lumian suddenly felt a pain in his head, as if someone had hit him heavily.
Aurore had a similar reaction.
Lumian's vision quickly turned black as he felt everything shatter.
.....
Lumian jolted awake and saw the familiar sights of the table, chair, bookshelf, and wardrobe.
Back to square one... He got off the bed thoughtfully and went downstairs. As expected, he found Aurore in a light-blue dress, preparing dinner.
"Aurore, what's the date today?" Lumian asked.
Aurore glared at him. "Call me Grande Soeur! Are you still not fully awake? It's the 29th today."

Chapter 43: Frank

As expected, the loop has repeated... Lumian wasn't surprised to hear Aurore's answer.

This was the third cycle he could recall. Combined with his own experience and the mysterious lady's pointers, he had a preliminary conclusion:

The time limit for the loop is until the twelfth night.

The spatial range of the loop is Cordu Village and its surroundings.

Characters in the loop are restricted from killing the padre.

These are the three key points of the loop...

At this thought, Lumian looked at Aurore and asked thoughtfully, "Grande Soeur, if you wrote a novel about a time loop, where would you put the key to undoing it?"

Aurore looked Lumian up and down in confusion. "You suddenly asked such a question and even called me Grande Soeur obediently... Did you come up with a new story to deceive others?"

"I guess so," Lumian replied sincerely.

Aurore frowned and thought for a while before saying, "From a novelist's perspective, or rather, from the perspective of normal logic, the most critical part of the cycle is definitely the final scene. This is because it is both the end of this cycle and the beginning of the next cycle. It is the button that connects the end and the beginning. Without it, there is no way to turn the flow of time in a straight line into a closed circle.

"Think about it. The loop reverses, so there will always be a first time. Something must have happened at the last moment to cause time to restart."

Twelfth night? Lumian agreed with his sister's guess about the twelfth night. He nodded and asked, "Then why can't the most critical part be the first day of the loop? Shouldn't we ask why the loop starts at this moment?"

Aurore chuckled and said, "Making a short story to deceive a few people temporarily is your forte, but when it involves this kind of content that requires strict logic and rich knowledge, you aren't capable of it.

"The reason why the first day of the loop is the first day is perhaps due to the power or energy that causes the loop. Proceeding past the last day will end up overlapping this day. This is like why a loop probably doesn't cover the entire world, but some localized area. It's not that it doesn't want to, but it's incapable of doing so."

Lumian had actually considered this possibility. He just hoped that his knowledgeable sister would come up with a different answer.

Aurore thought for a moment and added, "If the loop is not a

completely closed circle, where there is still interaction between those inside and outside the loop—for example, information inside can be transmitted, and people outside can enter but not leave—the first day of the loop might start from the day the outsiders happen to enter, so that when the loop is repeated, they don't have a 'position.' Of course, it can also compel the outsiders to do something they will do subsequently on the originally eventless first day. There are too many ways to make up similar stories."

Lumian's eyes lit up when he heard that. He wanted to praise his sister loudly.

He suspected that the entry of Leah, Ryan, and Valentine caused the cycle to start on the afternoon of March 29th.

If that was the case, the twelfth night might have already turned into the tenth or ninth night. Of course, it might also have originally been the thirteenth night that turned into the twelfth night due to the 'intrusion' of the outsiders.

These were all possibilities that Lumian needed to verify himself.

He completely agreed with his sister's deduction. He believed that something must have happened on the twelfth night to cause the loop to happen. Only by figuring out what happened at that time could he find the key to undoing the loop.

Therefore, Lumian decided not to trigger any abnormalities in this cycle. He also found an excuse not to join the procession and stay until the twelfth night.

But he couldn't do nothing. Time wouldn't allow it.

Unless Lumian broke out of the cycle after experiencing the twelfth night, he would have to make the best use of time for the next cycle.

A complete cycle lasted twelve days. After that, the probability of the outside world discovering any abnormalities in Cordu would increase exponentially. Lumian had, at best, one complete cycle or less to resolve the problem.

If he wanted to stop the abnormality in one cycle, he needed to have enough information and a sufficient understanding of the entire village.

Lumian couldn't help but mock himself. Not only do I have to avoid triggering the abnormality, but I also have to investigate the problem.

What was the difference between this and a clown walking on a tightrope at the edge of a cliff?

Wanting both wasn't something good.

Aurore saw that he didn't speak for a few seconds and seemed to be making up a story. She waved her hand and said, "I almost forgot to make dinner!"

"Wait a minute," Lumian said with a solemn expression.
Aurore immediately clicked her tongue. "I smell mischief."
Lumian said bluntly, "Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, actually, we've already fallen into a loop."
"Heh, you've just learned the trick and you're already using it on me?" Aurore was both angry and amused.
I guess people need to be trustworthy at times... Lumian sighed silently.
"Can you at least listen to the story I made up first? Why don't you score me while we're at it?"
Aurore looked outside at the bright sky.
"That works too."
Lumian began from the time he met Leah and the other outsiders. He spoke as if he had a general outline, claiming that he had maintained his consciousness in the dream and entered a unique ruin. Through hunting monsters, he obtained a Beyonder characteristic and became a Hunter.
He didn't hide the matter about the thorned ring pattern that sealed his chest because it might involve the key to the time loop. He had seen the same symbol on the padre, and killing the padre had caused time to restart.
At first, Aurore was still smiling, thinking that her brother had come up with a creative story. But as she listened, her expression turned serious. There was a lot of knowledge that Lumian shouldn't have known.
When Lumian said that he had become a Beyonder, Aurore raised her right hand and massaged her temples.
Her light-blue eyes instantly became deep, but there was no figure reflected in them.
She looked at Lumian for a while and nodded slightly.
"Your Ether Body has undergone a huge change. Your life force and physical state are much stronger than ordinary people. Your Astral Projection has changed to a certain extent, but not much... As expected of a Hunter who's better at hand-to-hand combat than spellcasting... I can't see the symbol and the related changes, and I don't dare to look deeper..."
Aurore pouted and asked in confusion, "Don't tell me you deliberately made up such a ridiculous story to make me accept your becoming a Beyonder?"
This was a typical Lumian modus operandi.
Lumian didn't explain and directly talked about the mysticism knowledge that the lady had imparted to him.
Of course, he only briefly mentioned the name and did not elaborate.

This was not because he was very moral and principled about not telling his sister before obtaining the lady's permission. Instead, the other party was clearly very powerful. If he leaked precious knowledge and angered her, the time loop might be resolved, but they would die.
"Indestructible law... law of convergence... acting method..." Aurore was dumbfounded.
Aurore was stunned that her illiterate brother in the field of mysticism had grasped such incomparably precious knowledge.
It had been more than five years since she became a Beyonder. At first, she had relied on Emperor Roselle's diary to join that organization. Her pathway was a symbol of knowledge in the field of mysticism. From time to time, she would be pursued by knowledge, allowing her to master the acting method, the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility, and the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Conservation, the three cornerstones of the Beyonder world. Therefore, she thought of herself as a Beyonder with insufficient experience but sufficient knowledge, miles ahead of most of her peers.
Now, her brother, who had never come into contact with mysticism, could actually mention such terms. Furthermore, he knew about a law of convergence of Beyonder characteristics that she didn't know about!
This eliminated the possibility that Lumian had peeked at her witchcraft notebook.
As a Beyonder of the Mystery Pryer pathway, Aurore suppressed her desire to know the specifics of the law of convergence as she looked at her brother. She asked in puzzlement, surprise, and worry, "What did you pay for that lady to teach you this knowledge?"
The potion formula was even free of charge!
She sized up Lumian again, from top to bottom, then from bottom to top, trying to find out what was missing from him.
"Nothing," Lumian laughed self-deprecatingly. "That's why it's terrifying. I don't even know what price I'll have to pay in the future. Yes, I suspect that it has something to do with the symbol on my chest and the dream ruin. That lady probably wants me to unravel the corresponding secret."
Aurore tersely acknowledged, "Continue."
She waited for the rest of the "story" with a serious attitude.
Lumian talked about the owl, the anomaly during Lent, and the siblings' experiences during the second cycle. He also talked about how the cycle would restart the moment they attempted to leave Cordu.

Aurore listened carefully and muttered to herself in disbelief, "Either I've been hypnotized by you and told you everything, or time has really entered a loop..."
She began to believe Lumian because she had named her "Integrity Brooch" herself, and there was no record anywhere. Unless she told her brother herself, it was impossible for Lumian to know, and she had no impression of it.
Lumian struck while the iron was hot.
"I can also prophesy that the three foreigners will appear at the Ol' Tavern at night. I can also prophesy that the padre is having an affair with Madame Pualis tonight. I can also prophesy that the shepherd, Pierre Berry, has returned to the village. There's something wrong with the three sheep he brought with him..."
The more Aurore listened, the more serious she became. After a while, she said, "The three foreigners entered the village in the afternoon while we were practicing combat. After that, we rested and didn't go out at all. Yes, in the combat class in the afternoon, you were still an ordinary person..."
She accepted Lumian's time loop theory.
If it were anyone else, Lumian would have laughed and said, "You believed it! Ha! You believed such a ridiculous story." But in front of Aurore, he was very restrained.
He then suggested, "I'll go around the village now and see if I can gather more information."
Aurore nodded.
"I'll also use my 'eyes' to look around, but there are huge restrictions and it's very dangerous. I'm not sure I'll gain anything."
Lumian waved his hand, indicating that he understood, and walked out the door.
As Lumian took a few steps, he looked back at Aurore's figure standing in the kitchen. He immediately thought of the scene of Aurore pushing him to safety among the countless undead and felt an inexplicable pain of separation.
He subconsciously asked, "Grande Soeur, why did you adopt me in the first place?"
Aurore grumpily replied, "I didn't want to either!
"I was just kind enough to give you some food, but you kept following me. I couldn't shake you off, and you even obediently helped me do all kinds of things. My heart softened for a moment, and... who knew that you would grow into this!
"Do you know how hard it was for a young girl to raise a child like you?"
Lumian wanted to thank and praise her, but the words were stuck in his mouth, as if they wanted to rush to his eyes and nose.

He turned his head and walked back into the village.

Chapter 44: Eavesdropping

Lumian had to investigate, but he couldn't activate any abnormalities, causing the cycle to restart ahead of time. He had to consider starting from the peripheral problems and edge in one step at a time.

His initial idea was to find the padre's mistresses this afternoon and use eavesdropping and other methods to see if they knew anything. If he didn't gain anything or lacked the opportunity for the time being, he would go to the cathedral to see if he could meet the padre and chat with him about daily life in the village.

Lumian's first target was Sybil Berry, the mistress of the padre Guillaume Bennet and the sister of the shepherd, Pierre Berry. She had a close relationship with the two abnormal figures, *so perhaps she knew something.*

Lumian's friend Guillaume-junior, Guillaume Berry, was a distant cousin of Pierre Berry. Even his hair color was different, and they didn't live together.

Sybil Berry was twenty-four years old and married to Jean Maury, a middle-aged man in his late forties.

He had been single for more than 30 years. The reason why he could marry Sybil Berry was because he did not have any requirements for dowry.

Lumian suspected that the reason why she married him using only a small amount of assets was that she had already become the padre's mistress at that time and needed a husband to be her illegitimate son's father. The padre had secretly promised something.

Although Intis was open-minded, and illegitimate children were common, many husbands or wives were still willing to take their spouses' illegitimate children under their wing despite being angry when they found out. After all, this was equivalent to having an additional free manservant or maid in the future. Furthermore, they didn't have the right to inherit any of the assets, but clergymen of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church weren't allowed to get married and have children. They often found fathers for their illegitimate children.

Lumian arrived at Jean Maury's house, a grayish-white short house at the edge of Cordu with only one floor. Behind the kitchen was the bedroom, and the other side was connected to the basement, serving as a living room and dining room.

There was no washroom; they only built a shed at the back of the house.

Lumian entered without knocking, quietly coming to the side of

the house and squatting under the bedroom window.
At that moment, someone was sitting inside. Lumian could hear their breathing and determined their corresponding height.
Not long after, light footsteps came from the kitchen to the bedroom.
There was no need to calculate. As a Hunter, Lumian naturally had the approximate weight of the owner of the footsteps in his mind.
It was likely a woman, probably Sybil Berry.
Lumian's impression of Sybil Berry was a woman with soft and smooth black hair who didn't like to tie it up like other women. She left it flowing down or tied it into a ponytail, giving off the feeling that she was still a young unmarried girl.
Her facial features were not outstanding, but they were soft and round, very fleshy.
At this moment, Jean Maury, who had been sitting silently in the bedroom, spoke gloomily.
"The padre came this afternoon?"
His voice was just like him, rather stuffy. He was the kind of person who usually chatted under the elm tree in the village square, replying one in every four or five sentences. In addition, he was often too lazy to comb his black hair. His brown eyes were lifeless, and his beard was not shaved clean. He looked gloomy.
"He was here." Sybil Berry's voice was still a little girlish.
She was born like this.
Jean Maury fell silent for a moment before asking, "Did you do it?"
"We did," Sybil answered frankly.
Jean Maury fell silent again. When Sybil walked to the kitchen, he said, "I don't have much to say about the padre, but you watch out for other men, especially Pato Russel."
Pato Russel was Madonna Bénet's husband. His wife was also the padre's mistress.
Lumian, who was outside the window, was secretly speechless.
This relationship was really messed up!
He gained a higher opinion of the padre. He had come to Sybil Berry in the afternoon, and he was having a date with Madame Pualis at night. He could be said to be a model worker in the field of cheating.
If he could allocate more energy in this area to the Church's matters and combine it with his scheming and machinations, he could have long advanced in clergical rank and become a Beyonder.
The clergical rank was the rank of a clergyman of the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun. Starting from the first rank, it was ostiary, reader, chanter, acolyte, sub-deacon, deacon—also known

as a priest or padre—bishop, archbishop, and cardinal. The pope was not in the ranks of the clergy.
Among them, the sixth-rank and above made them senior clergymen. In Aurore's words, it was possible that they possessed superpowers. As for the lowest three ranks, they mainly handled cathedral chores and ritual support. In the past few centuries, they were only glorified titles and were not treated as true clergymen. The fourth-rank acolytes were usually students who had just graduated from the seminary. The fifth-rank sub-deacon could represent a true priest to preside over a cathedral in a rural area.
The situation in Cordu was the same. A fifth-rank sub-deacon was the padre, a fourth-rank acolyte was the deputy padre, and they were staffed with a few servants.
Guillaume Bénet only needed to advance one more rank to become a true priest.
"I understand," Sybil Berry simply responded to her husband's exhortations.
Jean Maury changed the topic.
"Is your brother Pierre back from herding?"
"Yes, there's an important ritual that requires his help," Sybil casually explained.
A ritual? Lumian's eyelids twitched when he heard that.
Jean Maury asked, "The Lent Festival?"
"No, it's a ritual of God," Sybil impatiently replied. "Don't ask too much. You'll know when the time comes."
Jean Maury tersely acknowledged and said, "Praise the Sun!"
Sybil didn't respond and left the bedroom to walk into the kitchen.
Lumian instantly made a judgment.
Sybil had a certain understanding of the secret dealings between the padre and Shepherd Pierre Berry, but her husband, Jean Maury, was completely unaware!
The ritual she was talking about wasn't the "sacrificial ceremony" at the feast. It was likely related to twelfth night!
Having gained something, Lumian left Maury's house and rushed to the two-story building where Pato Russel and Madonna Bénet lived.
Unlike Sybil, Madonna Bénet was married off with her share of the inheritance. Pato Russel also received his share from his original home, so they could build a decent house and entrust more than 20 sheep to the shepherds for grazing.
Lumian didn't know when Madonna became the padre's mistress. He only knew that in the past year, before he hooked up with Madame Pualis, the padre often visited Madonna. *Perhaps the taboo from his identity sparked some kind of flame.*

At this moment, Pato Russel, who had a gentleman's beard, was pacing in the kitchen. He asked Madonna, who was busy commanding the lady's maid, "When will you invite the padre over as a guest again?"
He had a fervent expression, hoping to cling to the person with real power in Cordu.
Madonna glanced at Pato's father's illegitimate daughter, who was also the servant cooking, and said in a subtle tone, "I don't know. It depends on his mood."
And his physical condition, I suppose? Lumian, who was eavesdropping outside, silently muttered.
"Don't you often go to the cathedral to pray recently? You can ask him while you're at it," Pato Russel refused to give up.
Often go to the cathedral? Lumian frowned.
The padre's group is planning something in secret in the cathedral?
He really doesn't give a damn about the Eternal Blazing Sun and Saint Sith...
After listening for a while, Lumian walked from Russel's house to the cathedral at the edge of the village square, hoping to have a face-to-face chat with the padre.
However, when he arrived at the cathedral, Guillaume Bénet was no longer there. Only the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, stood in front of the altar.
This foreigner from Darième had graduated from Bigorre Theological Seminary. Last year, he was sent to Cordu on the bishop's orders to be Guillaume Bénet's deputy. He was usually ostracized and was only in charge of the registration of funerals, marriages, and newborns.
During the last cycle, Lumian had arrived at the cathedral and happened to encounter the padre leaving. The latter had asked him to pray the next day, not giving Michel a chance to listen to the prayers and confessions of the believers.
Michel was taller than Lumian. (Lumian felt that he had grown two to three centimeters taller after consuming the Hunter potion. He was almost 1.8 meters tall.) He was a young lad with curly brown hair.
Looking at Michel Garrigue, who was wearing a white robe with golden threads, Lumian spread his arms.
"Praise the Sun!"
After bowing, he stared at Michel, wanting to see how this deputy padre would react to the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun's etiquette.
If there was a certain amount of hesitation, Lumian would be able to determine that he had been implicated by the padre's group.

But Michel Garrigue immediately returned with the same posture.
"Praise the Sun!"
He did not hesitate at all. His brown eyes were filled with joy and anticipation.
From Madonna Bénet's words, the padre's group often discussed matters here. As a deputy padre, Michel should have noticed something, right? Lumian didn't ask directly. He looked around and asked, "The padre isn't here?"
"He's been gone for a while," Michel replied. "Three foreigners came here about 15 minutes ago, to no avail."
The deputy padre's eyes were passionate, as if he was asking if Lumian would make a confession while here.
Considering that the padre might have taken a detour and hid back in the cathedral, waiting for Madame Pualis to bring dinner over and was eavesdropping on his conversation with Michel, Lumian deliberately sighed.
"Then forget it. I'll pray again tomorrow."
Michel's eyes lost their luster.
Lumian turned around and left the cathedral. He planned on sneaking to Michel's residence when the night deepened to see if he could get any useful information.
Seeing that the sun was about to set, he returned home and asked Aurore, "Did you find anything?"
Aurore nodded slightly.
"In addition to the abnormalities you mentioned, I also discovered that there's something wrong with the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue."
"Huh?" Lumian didn't hide his surprise.

Chapter 45: Make-up Lesson

Lumian had just confirmed that Michel Garrigue should not have been implicated by Guillaume Bénet and the others. He planned to visit the deputy padre late at night, but when he returned home, he heard his sister say that there was something amiss about him.
Aurore glanced at Lumian and smiled.
"My clueless brother was standing right in front of him when I realized that something was off about him. Seems like you didn't notice..."
She appeared quite delighted, to the point that she had to raise her right hand to cover her mouth. After all, her younger brother, who was clearly ignorant of mysticism, had suddenly become a Beyonder. He had grasped a wealth of advanced knowledge and discovered that Cordu was stuck in a time loop. Not only had she been useless as a sister, but she also found herself outmatched in mysticism knowledge. This made her a tad unhappy.
Now, she had finally regained her dignity as an elder sister.
Lumian looked at his sister's smile and nodded.
"I didn't see anything unusual in his behavior."
Aurore tersely acknowledged, "His Astral Projection; how can I put it? Simply put, it's brighter than a normal person's, and he's not a Beyonder. He hasn't been training his body systematically for a long time."
"Maybe he was born with a good physique?" Lumian guessed before asking in puzzlement, "What's an Astral Projection?"
Aurore asked in surprise, "You don't know?"
"No." Lumian shook his head.
Aurore grinned again and said with a hint of disbelief, "That woman taught you divine paths, the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility, and the acting method, but she didn't tell you basic concepts like Astral Projection?"
"She was in a hurry, so she only focused on the main points." Lumian defended the mysterious woman.
Aurore smiled even more happily.
"Perhaps this basic mysticism knowledge is useless to unofficial Hunters. You just need to track, set traps, and fight."
She struggled to describe her brother's current state. To say he was ignorant of mysticism wasn't entirely accurate since he knew a great deal. The things he had learned were all formidable. To say that his knowledge surpassed most Beyonders wasn't right either; he didn't even know what an Astral Projection was.
Aurore sighed and said seriously, "I can only complete your mysticism education. Remember, in mysticism, the external parts

of the human body are divided into four levels. The innermost layer, which is also the core, is the Soul Body. It's almost equivalent to the concept of a spirit. It's the spirituality of everything—what gets strengthened. You could say it's the essence of building a soul.
"To a Mystery Pryer, the potion mainly upgrades the Soul Body.
"The Astral Projection is located outside the Soul Body. It's the latter's manifestation in the real and spirit worlds. Moreover, it's closely related to your will and current emotions.
"So, do you understand? When I said the deputy padre's Astral Projection was brighter than a normal person's, I meant that his Soul Body or spirit had an issue. This is reflected in his Astral Projection. It has nothing to do with his natural physique. Of course, it could be because his spirituality is naturally strong.
"Through the Astral Projection, we can still grasp the target's true emotions. For example, red signifies passion and excitement. Orange represents warmth and satisfaction. Yellow indicates happiness and extroversion. Green conveys calmness and peace. Blue suggests coldness and introspection. White denotes brightness—an eagerness to improve. Dark colors symbolize worry, sorrow, and silence. Purple implies that spirituality is taking control, coldness, and estrangement...
"It's very difficult to fake these colors, but they're relatively generic. It's impossible for us to distinguish subtle emotions and delicate feelings."
Lumian listened attentively, as if he wanted to take out a fountain pen and jot everything down.
"Just listen." Aurore felt a little worn out from talking. She sat down at the dining table. "I'll give you my first witchcraft notebook later. It's filled with such basic knowledge."
"Alright, alright." Lumian sat down and nodded obediently. "What's outside the Astral Projection?"
Aurore picked up her carved glass cup and took a sip.
"Beyond that is the Body of Heart and Mind. From this point on, spirit and flesh merge.
"The Body of Heart and Mind involves the mind. It relates to one's reasoning, thinking, insight, and ability to understand things. Some potions mainly improve this, but there are also many spells targeting it.
"The outermost layer is the Ether Body. It's a manifestation of life force and physical state, so I can tell at a glance that your body has improved greatly. Yes, through the thickness, brightness, and color of different parts of the Ether Body, I can also determine the target's health. As a Sequence 7 Mystery Pryer, I can even

determine the target's lifespan from the specific situation of the Ether Body.
"As for how to differentiate them, read the notebook later."
Lumian was enlightened.
"The Hunter potion mainly targets the Ether Body?"
"You're wrong. It targets the body and life force, and 'Ether Body' is the straightforward manifestation of both."
Lumian nodded as he revised, gaining a preliminary understanding of such mysticism knowledge.
He recalled his sister's words and asked curiously, "Aurore, how did you observe the deputy padre? Why didn't I sense you nearby?"
Aurore smiled.
"Actually, I've been staying at home all this while, using the Mystery Pryer pathway's special trait."
"What's special?" Lumian asked with the mentality that it didn't matter if his sister didn't answer.
Aurore pointed at her eyes.
"The most unique ability of a Mystery Pryer is called the Eyes of Mystery Prying.
"Although I need to reach a higher Sequence before I can activate the complete Eyes of Mystery Prying, allowing it to not only be of use to me, but it can also be placed on the surface of other objects to help me monitor matters remotely, this doesn't mean that Mystery Pryer's eyes aren't special before this."
"From Sequence 9 onwards, a Mystery Pryer has seen more than most Sequence Beyonders of the same pathway. The simplest example is that a Hunter can only see an Ether Body before they undergo a qualitative change in their godhood. Furthermore, it's in a less detailed manner. And now, I can examine the various details of the Astral Projection. In addition, I can also see things around me that aren't normally visible."
Aurore glanced at the kitchen.
This made Lumian inexplicably shocked.
There was clearly nothing in that direction, but he felt that there might be something invisible that he could not see!
Aurore continued, "Of course, this might not be a good thing. It's very easy for something to happen when you see something you shouldn't see. Therefore, I've been restraining myself. I don't look at things I shouldn't see, but as my Sequence increases, it's not up to you not to look."
Lumian thought for a moment and asked in confusion, "Didn't you say that only higher Sequences can project out the Eyes of Mystery Prying? Why can you observe the people in the cathedral from home?"

Aurore raised her right hand and pointed with her index finger.
"I've always told you that knowledge equals power, but you didn't believe me!
"Under normal circumstances, it's true that I can't observe things hundreds of meters away from home, but humans can use tools, and I have two 'assistants'."
As she spoke, she took out two items from a hidden pocket in her blue dress.
One was a brass telescope that could shrink and lengthen, and the other was a miniature version of a dark ink bottle—this was more like a child's toy.
"Look, the telescope can help me see people a few hundred meters away clearly. Once the visual range is closed, I can observe the target's Astral Projection, Ether Body, and Body of Heart and Mind state," Aurore introduced with a smile. "This is suitable for open spaces without obstacles."
Lumian was a little dumbfounded.
That works too?
They were clearly discussing mysticism. *Why did his sister take out a telescope?*
"What about this?" He pointed at the pocket ink bottle.
Aurore didn't answer. She massaged her temples and opened the bottle cap.
Lumian suddenly felt a little cold. A cool breeze seemed to blow in through the window.
"It's a unique spirit world creature," Aurore introduced.
"It? Where is it?" Lumian looked around.
Aurore was rather surprised.
"You still don't know how to activate Spirit Vision? But didn't you say you saw a lot of undead in the wilderness?"
Lumian had read about the term Spirit Vision in Psychic and knew what it meant. However, he was completely at a loss as to how to activate Spirit Vision.
He looked at his sister and slowly shook his head.
"I don't know." Then, he guessed, "Maybe ordinary people can see ghosts and undead directly when entering the so-called Paramita."
Aurore thought seriously and asked, "So, you don't know Hermes, ancient Hermes, Elvish, Dragonese, or Jotun?"
"What are those?" Lumian fully displayed what it meant to be illiterate in the field of mysticism.
Aurore couldn't help but facepalm.
"What exactly did that lady teach you?"
"Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility, law of convergence, acting method, paths of the divine, Sequence 0,

Sealed Artifacts..." Lumian answered honestly.
"..." Aurore felt like he was flaunting. "I think you want a beating!"
She sighed for a few seconds before regaining her composure.
"Then I'll combine it with my contracted creature to teach you how to activate Spirit Vision, how to carry out ritualistic magic, and how to use language with supernatural powers.
"This is only a rough explanation. If you really want to completely master it, especially those few languages, it will take at least a year or two. Of course, this is also a problem with your Sequence pathway. Hunters probably don't have their learning abilities improved, nor do they have any enhancements in mysticism. Back then, I relied on diligence and indoctrination to master all of them in less than half a year."
Her right hand gently stroked the void in front of her, as if she was stroking a transparent kitten.
"It's very simple for Beyonders to activate their Spirit Vision, but it's not completely dark yet. Let's talk about something else first.
"I call it White Paper. It's a very weak spirit world creature. As long as you have an accurate description, you can hold a ritual and summon it in your name. Other than the fact that spirit world creatures are difficult to see, it only has one use. That is to carry a certain supernatural ability of the contractor, but it can't be too complicated or too powerful."

Chapter 46: Ritualistic Magic

Lumian gazed at the invisible spirit world creature and contemplated for a moment.

"How complicated can it get? How strong can it be?"

"Heh, I thought you'd ask how to summon or perform ritualistic magic, but you just want to know how to use it!" Aurore teased. "That might be a characteristic of the Hunter pathway. You don't need to fully understand the principles, only consider how to apply them."

Not waiting for Lumian's response, she pondered and said, "I've tried. Not too complicated means it can only perform one action. Not too powerful means it can't surpass a Mystery Pryer Sequence 7 Warlock's spell."

It's nice discussing this with Aurore. She has a habit of analyzing things both qualitatively and quantitatively, unlike someone who prefers vague descriptions... Lumian felt emotional hearing that.

As he mulled it over, he stood up and helped his sister bring the food to the dining table. As they ate, he asked, "But I remember your spells often require materials. You can't carry White Paper, right?"

"Yes, that's inconvenient." Aurore grabbed a piece of fried trout and stuffed it into her mouth. After chewing and swallowing, she said, "Moreover, a Warlock's spells can't be completed in one move. Even the simplest has three steps. First is concentrating spirituality, the second is outlining the symbol of the corresponding spell in the mind. This can also be replaced by reciting the incantation aloud. The third is using materials to cast the spell. The materials serve either as a medium or part of the spell."

This does sound a little complicated. It isn't something the single-celled White Paper can do... Lumian knew he couldn't do it anytime soon. He'd need extensive training before he could cast spells proficiently.

Aurore glanced at him.

"Don't even think about it. It's impossible for you to be like me. First, you're limited by your Sequence, and your spirituality is insufficient. Second, using materials to help cast spells is a unique ability only Warlocks have. Yes, perhaps certain Sequences of certain pathways can do it. I don't know enough to make a definite judgment.

"However, once a Hunter reaches Sequence 7 and becomes a Pyromaniac, they can use many fire-related spells. Furthermore, they don't need materials, nor do they need to outline symbols or recite incantations in their minds. In terms of actual combat, it's

faster, more convenient, and might even be stronger. As for Warlocks, their main advantage lies in their versatility. The more knowledge they acquire, the more comprehensive and powerful they become."
Lumian said with anticipation, "I don't know when I can become a Pyromaniac..."
He planned to explore the dream ruins again tonight. Firstly, he wanted to use hunting to help digest the potion, and secondly, he wanted to find clues about the main ingredient of Sequence 8 Provoker.
As for the corresponding monsters of the Pyromaniac, he didn't dare think about them yet. He believed it would be like serving himself on a platter. After all, those creatures could definitely launch long-range attacks, rendering his "special" abilities useless.
He then asked, "Can White Paper withstand the Pyromaniac's one-movement spells?"
"Theoretically, yes, but I'm not sure if Pyromaniac's spells exceed a certain level." Aurore's reference standard was Warlock.
Upon hearing this, Lumian became excited.
"If I could, wouldn't I be able to simulate the Funnels you mentioned?"
"Huh?" Aurore was puzzled.
Lumian explained his idea in detail, "I can summon a group of White Papers and form a contract with them. Then, I can have each White Paper carry a fireball. They'll float in the air and attack the target together. Isn't that similar to the description of the Funnels?"
"Unfortunately, you can't have a group of White Papers at the same time," Aurore laughed. "After you form a contract with a White Paper, the next time you use the initial summoning description, the same White Paper will appear."
"Can I summon one first and hold off on the contract? Then, I'll summon another until I have a satisfactory number before forming a contract?" Lumian hadn't received a traditional education, but instead, a custom one that included Aurore's ideas. Combined with the "refinement" of years of pranks, he always had creative ideas.
"..." Aurore admitted she wasn't that cunning. She considered and said, "I've never tried it before, so I don't know if it'll work. You can try it yourself when you're at Sequence 7. However, I think having a White Paper beside you while summoning others might cause a conflict. It's unlikely to succeed. The only hope is to directly summon multiple White Papers, but there's a high chance that only Sequences skilled at summoning can do it."

Lumian decided to give it a try when the time came. After all, he had nothing to lose.
Aurore scooped up some mashed potatoes.
"Now, let's talk about how to summon creatures from the spirit world. This is an application of ritualistic magic.
"Ritualistic magic is magic cast by selecting the date and time, preparing the corresponding materials, and strictly following the format and process. It's often used in prayers and summonings."
Lumian nodded. "It's to achieve a certain supernatural effect through a ritual?"
He thought of the various rituals of the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun, as well as the process of the Lent celebration.
"Yes," Aurore was very satisfied with her brother's comprehension ability. "To put it simply, ritualistic magic needs a target to pray to. It can be the seven orthodox gods, other hidden beings, or even evil gods or devils. It can even be you. When you pray to the orthodox gods, you need to check or choose the date and time they rule over. For example, Tuesday symbolizes the Eternal Blazing Sun, and there is a corresponding Sun hour every day. During these times, the probability of success will be greatly increased if you perform the ritualistic magic that targets the Eternal Blazing Sun.
"However, this isn't very useful. Those who aren't official Beyonders have a very low chance of successfully praying to the corresponding orthodox god. Even if you receive a response, don't be happy. This might mean that you have been noticed by that entity.
"Of course, we also have ways to bypass restrictions. For example, obtaining an item closely related to the target deity.
"There's no need to pick a date or time to pray to a hidden being or an evil god or devil, but I don't need to tell you how dangerous it is, right? 99% of people who do this don't end up well.
"Therefore, for wild Beyonders, the most commonly used ritualistic magic is to pray to themselves to mobilize their spirituality to complete some relatively complicated tasks.
"Create charms and Beyonder weapons?" Lumian recalled a point of knowledge that the lady had mentioned.
Aurore nodded.
"That's right. Some mystical medicines also require ritualistic magic.
"You also missed something. Summoning a creature from the spirit world."
She ate some more food before saying, "The second step of ritualistic magic is to prepare the corresponding ingredients. If you wish to pray to an existence, prepare herbs, essential oils,

powders, extracts, and so on from their domain to please them. Let's use the Eternal Blazing Sun as an example. If you pray to Him, you can use Sun essential oil, rosemary powder, Buddha's hand, and all kinds of sunflowers. As for praying to yourself, it won't be too troublesome. Although it's best to use the ingredients in your domain, someone like you can even put a cup of absinthe. It's fine even if you don't do so.
"The third step is to set up an altar. This can be determined by the environment. There's no need for a special holy solemnity. It's mainly because there can't be any miscellaneous items.
"The most important thing about the altar is the candles..."
Aurore picked up her knife and fork as she spoke.
She stretched out the two items and said, "Pretend that they are candles. If you pray to a deity, make them with the corresponding symbolic materials.
"As an example, the Eternal Blazing Sun has the Inextinguishable Light and the Embodiment of Order in His name." Out of caution, Aurore paused for a few seconds before continuing, "God of Deeds and Guardian of Businesses."
"There should be the honorific name 'Father of All Life,' right?" Lumian asked, familiar with the preaching.
Aurore shook her head.
"That's just a title used by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church when proselytizing. It's beyond Him in mysticism. If it was really part of His name, it would mean something big had happened."
She didn't give any more details, unsure herself.
She brought the conversation back on track.
"Anyway, if you want to exorcize the undead, you have to pray to the symbol of Inextinguishable Light. So, you need to make candles out of different sunflowers. For contracts, use the honorific title of the God of Deeds to make candles with Buddha's hand and other materials. Check my witchcraft notebook for more options."
"In ritualistic magic, we can only place two candles at the spot corresponding to the deity. This is because in mysticism, 0 represents the unknown or Chaos. It symbolizes the state of the world before it was born. If we don't place the candles, it means that there won't be any effect. 1 represents a beginning, the first Creator; it also accurately pinpoints a particular existence. 2 represents the world and various divinities that were produced from the Creator's body. Therefore, ritualistic magic can only have two candles to represent the deity. As for which candles to use, it depends on the desired effect.
"Three represent all things, so the third candle is for us. The two candles in the upper position represent the deity, and the candle in

front is for myself, for a total of three candles. If you have an item related to a deity or a hidden existence, you can replace the two candles with that item for a dualistic ritual. If you pray to yourself, leave only the candle that represents yourself."
Lumian listened attentively, realizing that as a wild Hunter, he could only pray to himself in ritualistic magic before knowing the honorific name of the great existence. *Where would he find items closely related to a deity?*
"Let me show you the next few steps using summoning creatures from the spirit world," Aurore said, standing up as she saw her brother finish his dinner.
They quickly cleared the dining table.
",

Chapter 47: Truly "Illiterate"

Aurore looked at the slightly stained white tablecloth and smiled at Lumian.

"If you're the target of ritualistic magic, it doesn't matter if the altar is dirty. But if you want to pray to a deity or a hidden existence, I suggest you change to a cleaner piece of cloth or remove the cloth and wipe the table."

"Anything works if I'm just praying to yourself, right?" Lumian teased.

Aurore chuckled.

"That refers to the environment, materials, and equipment, but the ritual process and incantations must strictly follow the rules of mysticism."

She pulled out an orange candle from her pocket.

"This is a candle mixed with citrus and lavender. It has nothing to do with their domain; I just like it."

Aurore waved the candle above the altar.

"Remember, the candle representing the deity is placed in these two places. It can be empty now."

Then she placed the candle close to her.

"Remember, this is the location of 'me'."

Next, Aurore brought a cup of water, a plate of coarse salt, and a small steel bowl from the kitchen.

"We need to create a clean and undisturbed ritual environment. Clean in the sense of spirituality. We have to construct it ourselves. Enter Cogitation and focus your mind. You can guide the spiritual power out through supplementary items and build a wall of spirituality around the altar.

"Mystery Pryers and Seers find this simple. Hunters need the help of other items before reaching Sequence 7. For example, incense to calm your emotions and make you ethereal, or a crystal ball to help you focus on your spirituality.

"The meditation I taught you before is incomplete. It's only the first step. It can only gather your thoughts and calm you down. I'll teach you the rest later."

Lumian was surprised. *Why can I activate the dream's specialness and make the two symbols appear if the meditation method is incomplete?*

Aurore pulled out a silver dagger.

"Watch carefully how I build the wall of spirituality."

Lumian was stunned and blurted out, "Why do you have so many things on you?"

First, there were various casting materials, a retractable telescope,

a miniature ink bottle that stored the spirit world creature, White Paper, and candles for rituals. Now, she had taken out a dagger.
Aurore sighed in exasperation.
"Do you think I want to? It's just inconvenient for Warlocks.
"It takes me a long time to alter each of my clothes. Sometimes, I even feel like Doraemon. I can take out whatever I want."
"What —Amon?" Lumian asked, not understanding the reference.
Aurore hesitated for a moment before replying with a mixed expression, "You don't need to know."
Lumian suddenly felt a pang of sadness for his sister.
Aurore composed herself and reached for the orange candle representing her.
"In ritualistic magic, candles can't simply be lit. Of course, there are times when ordinary methods can work, but that's not always the case," Aurore explained. "The correct way is to extend your spirituality, rub it against the wick, and light it."
As she spoke, she lit the candle with a spark of spirituality, and it burned with an orange flame.
The dining table transformed into an altar, and the surrounding area was bathed in a deep, otherworldly light.
Aurore's light-blue eyes had darkened, and an invisible wind swirled around her as she plunged the silver dagger into the coarse salt and began chanting a mysterious incantation.
"XXX, XXX!
"..."
Lumian was bewildered as he watched his sister complete the incantation and draw out the silver dagger. She stabbed it into the cup of water and raised it again.
Aurore pointed the dagger outward and began to walk around the altar. With each step she took, Lumian sensed an invisible force emanating from the dagger. It was agile and lively,
mingling with the air to create an impenetrable barrier.
As Aurore completed the circle, Lumian felt as if she had been transported to a different realm.
"Did you understand the steps?" Aurore's voice sounded distant.
Lumian nodded truthfully.
"Yes, but I don't understand what you mean."
Aurore could not help but laugh.
"You're completely illiterate when it comes to mysticism. Literally. That's Hermes. When translated, it's:
"I sanctify you, blade of pure silver!
"I cleanse and purify you, allowing you to serve me in this ritual!
...
"In the name of Warlock Aurore Lee,

"You have been sanctified!"
Lumian scratched his head. "It sounds ordinary."
"That's just the translation. The meaning of the incantation and the language used is what's important," Aurore explained, her eyes lighting up. "In Intisian, it might sound ordinary, but if you use Hermes, ancient Hermes, Elvish, Dragonese, or Jotun, you can tap into supernatural powers. That's what sets them apart."
Lumian asked curiously, "Are these the only languages that can communicate with the mysterious?"
"No, there are many other languages in the field of mysticism, each with its own specialties. For example, some are specifically meant for the undead, but most Beyonders won't be able to use them unless they want to study a unique and rare domain or perform the corresponding ritual," Aurore explained casually.
She went on to explain the incantation.
"During the sanctification ritual, the penultimate sentence should be in the name of a certain deity or a hidden existence, but as wild Beyonders, it's best not to use them to avoid unnecessary trouble.
"As a Beyonder, it's enough to use your name to sanctify an ordinary item. Although it won't be as effective as the original version, it can still be used."
Lumian nodded, then asked, "You came up with my name. Can I use it in the ritual?"
Aurore replied confidently, "Yes. A completely new name wouldn't work, but your name has been in use for several years, so there's a mystic connection."
She paused for a moment before continuing, "If you're in the wild and don't have many materials, you can complete the ritual with simple salt or clear water."
With that, Aurore pulled out a small silver-black metal bottle from her pocket.
"This is my own concoction of essential oil called 'Wizard of Oz.' What sets it apart is that it smells good," Aurore explained as she dripped three drops of light green liquid on the candle representing her.
The light of the candle flickered and sizzled, and a faint mist spread out, giving Aurore and the altar an air of mystique.
"Now for the important part," Aurore said, pulling a small imitation goatskin from her pocket. "If you're holding a ritualistic magic that prays to a deity, you need to draw the symbol of what you want on the paper and burn it during the ritual.
"The first part is a prayer for someone's power. This 'someone' needs to be replaced by the symbol of a deity, an honorific name, or a domain ruled over by Them. For example, I pray for the power

of the Sun or the power of Order. Remember, there are always two sentences that correspond to the two candles that represent the deity.
"The second part is 'I pray for the God's loving grace.' Remember, don't call Him by His name. Doing so in a ritual is sacrilegious. The Eternal Blazing Sun can be referred to as God or Father.
"The third part is what you want to pray for. You must be brief and finish it in one sentence.
"The fourth part is to give more power to the incantation. For example, 'Sun Flower, a herb that belongs to the Sun. Please bestow your powers to my incantation.' You can choose two to three types based on the materials used.
"After reciting the incantation, drip a drop of essential oil on each candle and burn the piece of paper that was used to draw the symbol. After the paper is burned, the ritual comes to an end. Then, thank the deity and extinguish the candles in the order of 'me', followed by 'god', right to left. Dispel the wall of spirituality. Oh, and remember to light the candles from left to right, beginning with 'god' followed by 'me'."
Lumian nodded twice in acknowledgement before asking, "What about praying to yourself?"
Aurore chuckled before explaining, "The incantation is even simpler. I'll use summoning spirit world creatures as an example. For the first part, there's only one word: 'I'. Remember, you can't use modern Hermes here. It has to be ancient Hermes, Elvish, Dragonese, or Jotun. The second part is 'I summon in my name,' which can be said in modern Hermes. The third part is the exact description of the summoned spirit world creature."
Lumian was curious. "What's an exact description?"
Aurore explained solemnly, "It needs to be limited to three lines to help us lock onto the creature we want to summon."
"For instance, if someone said they were looking for the prankster of Cordu Village, Aurore Lee's idiot brother, and a regular customer of Ol' Tavern, we know exactly who they're looking for because of the specific characteristics given."
"I get it!" Lumian was enlightened. "So, if we don't know the target's name, appearance, or address, we can use their characteristics to help find them."
Aurore said seriously, "That's the principle, but there are many problems when put into practice. For example, when summoning creatures from the spirit world, the first sentence is often fixed. It's either 'the spirit that wanders about the unfounded' or 'spirit wandering above the world.' Its function is to point to the spirit world and clearly state that we want to summon a spirit.

"The second sentence is also very universal. We don't summon spirit world creatures to harm ourselves, so we must restrict it to friendly creatures. Sometimes, we also add the word 'weak'. This is because some spirit world creatures may be very friendly, but their existence can bring great danger.
"Considering these circumstances, the description is fixed. 'The friendly creature that can be subordinated', 'the friendly creature that can be consulted', 'the weak creature that can be subordinated', and so on.
"But based on these two descriptions, the direction is still very broad. It doesn't reflect our needs. Therefore, the third description is very important. You need to use a sentence to clearly explain what creature you want to summon."
"Sounds very difficult." Lumian felt a headache just thinking about it.
Aurore nodded.
"Not only is it difficult, but it's also dangerous. When the direction is vague, it might summon a spirit you don't need or a creature that brings danger. Remember, being weak doesn't mean it can't kill you, just like being friendly doesn't mean it won't pose a threat to you."

Chapter 48: Knowledge Pursuer

Lumian deeply understood Aurore's words.

As a vagrant, he knew better than to underestimate anyone. Some adult vagrants suffered massive losses because they looked down on him and assumed him to be weak. As for some almsgivers, they provided food out of kindness but forgot to consider the starving bodies of the vagrants, causing them to make the wrong decisions.

After a moment of serious thought, Lumian said, "It seems like the description of a creature that can be summoned with relative precision is very valuable."

Aurore nodded solemnly. "That's right. A notebook that records the corresponding summoning incantations is very precious. Every incantation and commentary on it is exchanged with life, blood, or pain. For example, when I summoned White Paper, the three lines described it as 'the spirit that wanders about the unfounded, the friendly creature that can be subordinated, the weak ball that can telepathically connect with me'. You have to make countless attempts and experience countless failures before you can piece one together. And every failure implies a huge risk."

Is this a description that a normal person can come up with? In particular, the words 'weak' and 'ball'… As Lumian criticized inwardly, he asked, "So, you bought this from someone else?"

"No." Aurore shook her head and said with a bitter expression, "The Mystery Pryer pathway is different from other pathways. From time to time, it will be chased by a large amount of knowledge. It's impossible to ignore, and there's no way to reject it even if one can't handle it. And when one consumes a potion to advance, the situation of being chased by knowledge becomes even more serious.

"Although most of this knowledge is useless, there will always be some that are valuable. The incantation to summon White Paper was one of them."

Lumian understood. "Indoctrination from the Hidden Sage?"

Aurore looked at him in surprise. "You know that? Did that lady teach you?"

"Yeah." Lumian nodded.

Aurore pursed her lips, lost in thought.

"From my personal experience, Knowledge Pursuit isn't limited to the Hidden Sage's indoctrination. My so-called 'ear ringing' does indeed hear His voice, where I gain knowledge, but it always puts me in pain. My head is close to exploding, and I wish I could lose control.

"But occasionally, especially when I'm not in the best state and am

about to lose control, I have an illusion that all the knowledge in the world has come to life. A small number of them will chase after me and rush towards me, but I can't dodge them. This is how the summoning incantation for White Paper barged into my brain.
"When consuming the potion, 99% of the Knowledge Pursuit comes from the Hidden Sage. 1% is related to revived knowledge."
"It's very magical and terrifying. It can scare everyone in the village." As Lumian sighed with emotion, he was thinking for his sister about whether there was a way to resolve the problem of Knowledge Pursuit or reduce its impact.
Aurore replied with a bitter smile, "It's precisely because I often suffer such torture that I don't want you to follow the path of Beyonders. But in our current situation, it's better to become a Beyonder than an ordinary person."
To make her brother remember the madness and danger of the path to transcendence, she pointed at her head.
"After being pursued by knowledge and experiencing pain for a long time, I feel that my mind and personality have undergone a certain mutation.
"Don't I always tell you that I have a phobia for social interaction, but I am very talkative sometimes? I like to go out and chat with the old ladies in the village and tell stories to the children. Occasionally, I will go crazy and borrow Madame Pualis's pony to ride free into the mountains and shout?
"Being especially talkative is a kind of rebound from prolonged isolation and being unable to return to my true home. The path to transcendence is also a form of oppression.
"And the occasional madness..."
At this point, Aurore chuckled and looked at Lumian.
"You don't think that's just an exaggerated adjective, do you?"
Lumian fell silent, feeling his sister's smile was self-deprecating, lost, and filled with indescribable pain and struggle.
Aurore sighed.
"During those times, I wouldn't even recognize myself."
Lumian felt deeply helpless. "There should be a solution."
"Hopefully, let's continue," Aurore said, pointing at the altar. "After we sign a contract with the summoned spirit world creature, it'll be easy to summon it again. We can change the last description to 'contracted creature that belongs to Aurore Lee.' That will be very accurate, right? Besides, before the contract is terminated, no one can summon it again."
Lumian was concerned. "Everyone can only have one contracted creature?"
"Not really. I'm not sure how high the upper limit is, but it's

definitely more than one, especially with some special Sequences. When summoning, say the first contract creature or second contract creature of the person to differentiate." Aurore spoke the truth. "In addition, summoning creatures from the spirit world will consume your spirituality. The more you summon, the greater the consumption. With a Hunter's spirituality, I estimate that it can only withstand one contract creature at most."

Knowing her brother's personality, she curbed any loopholes that Lumian might find.

"Every spirit world creature can only stay for a limited period of time after being summoned to reality. The weaker they are, the longer they can stay. You don't have to think about summoning one first. You can summon the next one after your spirituality recovers, unless you choose a very weak one. And only when your spirituality is significantly stronger than it is now."

She used White Paper as an example.

"If I didn't let White Paper be a vessel for my powers, it could stay in reality for twelve hours. If I share the specialness of my eyes with it and let it do things for me, it can last at most three hours, and my spirituality would be constantly depleted."

Lumian was disappointed. He had wanted to form an army of spirit world creatures.

He thought for a moment and asked, "Can I only summon creatures from the spirit world? Can I only summon spirits?"

"No," Aurore shook her head. "We can also summon creatures affiliated with the spirit world, the real world, and the astral world, as well as creatures from alternate worlds or other planets. Regardless of whether they are spirits or not, this is very dangerous. Most of the Beyonders who have attempted this have died tragically, and a small number have mysteriously disappeared. Only the corresponding notebooks were left behind to prove what they had done."

Lumian asked curiously, "Can I summon something from the real world?"

Aurore pondered for a moment before responding, "In theory, as long as the other party has a close relationship with the spirit world or has reached a certain level, they should be able to hear the summoning and decide if they want to respond. However, such a target is either very special or very powerful. If you want to live well, don't try it."

"Furthermore, when the summoning target isn't a spirit, the requirements for the corresponding ritual will be even higher. It will require more spirituality, and it might even require a large number of sacrifices. Only then can we open the Door of

Summoning that can be used by non-spiritual creatures.
"You can barely summon White Paper with a Hunter's spirituality. If you want to try something more powerful, you can only pray to a deity or a hidden existence. For this, you might have to prepare something filled with spirituality as a sacrifice."
Lumian roughly understood the ritualistic magic of summoning.
"So next, you are going to recite an incantation and complete the summoning?"
"How is that possible?" Aurore scoffed. "The ritual has been interrupted so many times. How can we continue? In fact, normally, as long as we follow the process, we can resume from any breaks. However, I was mainly explaining, and didn't divert my attention to do the corresponding things."
You probably forgot... Lumian muttered inwardly but didn't dare say it out loud.
Aurore then said, "However, I do want to hold a summoning ritual. On the one hand, I want to give you a complete demonstration of the entire process. On the other hand, I want to seek help."
"Seek help?" Lumian asked in puzzlement.
Summoning powerful spirit world creatures to help?
Aurore explained, "Among the countless spirit world creatures, only a very small number of them can act as messengers. Private messengers—uh, messengers can be summoned by others based on special contracts.
"For example, if I have a contracted messenger, someone in Trier can summon it and give it a written letter. It will immediately pass through the spirit world and deliver the letter to me.
"Due to the special connection between the spirit world and the contract, it only takes a second or two to complete the letter delivery."
Lumian sighed from the bottom of his heart. "Very impressive. It's as fast as sending a telegram."
But the thought that crossed his mind was: I want one too!
"Don't even think about it," Aurore read his mind. "It's very difficult to summon a messenger. Unless you obtain an exact incantation, it's unlikely that you can succeed trying yourself. And only a few special Sequences can grasp an exact incantation. Even I don't have one."
Lumian was disappointed and asked,
"Are you going to summon a messenger and write a letter to them for help?"
"Yes," Aurore nodded. "She's one of the few among us who have gone the furthest on the path to transcendence. She has her own messenger. I don't expect her to save me, but she should be able to

give me some advice."
I'm afraid it's very difficult. That mysterious lady said that we can only rely on ourselves... Lumian asked curiously,
"Us? You mean your pen pals?"
Aurore nodded and asked in confusion, "When did I ever mention pen pals to you?"
"Last cycle, no, last last cycle," Lumian answered honestly.
"Alright," Aurore facepalmed. "Actually, it's a mutual support organization slowly established by those of us who can't return home. We rely on letters to communicate daily, share knowledge, and solve problems. There will be small-scale gatherings or communication through messengers. She's the vice president of our organization and one of the initiators. Her code name is 'Hela'."
"Code name?" Lumian was a little puzzled.
Aurore tersely acknowledged, "In the organization, everyone uses code names without exposing their real names. When they write letters, they emphasize that it's a pseudonym to avoid being discovered by the officials."
"What's your code name?" Lumian was very curious.
Aurore was silent for a moment before she replied with a sigh, "Muggle."
"What does it mean?" Lumian was puzzled.
Aurore's eyes darkened as she replied, "Ordinary person without superpowers."
Lumian knew that his sister wanted to become an ordinary person living back home more, so he quickly changed the topic.
"What's the name of your organization?"
Aurore's expression became complicated.
"Originally, everyone wanted to give it a classy name, but considering that we would write letters every day, a name that was too conspicuous would attract the attention of certain forces. Therefore, in the end, we decided on a name that sounds like a group of animal lovers."
"What is it?" Lumian pressed.
Aurore replied in embarrassment, "The Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society."

Chapter 49: True Cogitation

Lumian couldn't help but suppress his laughter at the name of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but he managed to hold it in.

But even if he held it in, he couldn't help but say, "Those who know will understand that you're studying curly-haired baboons. Those who don't know will think that a group of curly-haired baboons are doing research."

Of course, he was only joking.

Aurore rolled her eyes at him. "We often tease ourselves as a group of curly-haired baboons being studied."

Seeing that his sister was in a better mood, Lumian asked, "Are all the members of your research society Beyonders?"

"Not all of them," Aurore answered briefly. "But some gatherings can't be attended by ordinary people."

She didn't say why they couldn't participate.

"Who's the president? How many vice presidents are there?" Lumian asked.

"Are you doing a census?" Aurore snapped back.

"Huh?" Lumian was confused.

Lumian was confused and realized that Aurore didn't like him asking too many questions about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

Aurore pouted and exhaled.

"The president's code name is Gandalf. There are a total of five vice presidents.

"Alright, I'm going to summon Hela's messenger."

Lumian was puzzled and asked, "Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, didn't you say that you only know the code name 'Hela' and don't know her exact name? How are you going to summon her messenger?"

He remembered that his sister had just mentioned that by changing the last sentence of the summoning incantation to "the messenger that belongs to so-and-so", he could very accurately pinpoint the target creature. However, she didn't know who "so-and-so" was.

"Excellent," Aurore praised him and said, "to be able to discover the problem is an excellent learning quality. Let's put it this way. It doesn't matter what name you use when you sign a contract with a spirit world creature. The contract will automatically extract a bit of your true aura from you, allowing the two parties to be related. However, remember, you can only use the name written when you sign the contract in the future. Changing it to your real name will be ineffective."

Lumian pondered seriously and said, "Got it. The key is the aura and connection. The name when signing the contract is only equivalent to the incantation used for the subsequent summoning. It doesn't matter what you write."
"Yes." Aurore nodded.
Lumian suddenly laughed.
"Is there such a situation? Let me say hypothetically. Grande Soeur, you obtained an exact incantation and summoned a messenger. You signed a contract with it in the name of Aurore Lee. After that, you taught me that incantation because you loved your younger brother, which is me. As for me, I successfully summoned another messenger. However, when signing the contract, I used Aurore Lee's name to sign it for fun.
"Then the question is, which one will be summoned with the description of 'the messenger that belongs to Aurore Lee'?"
Aurore's face turned livid. "I don't have a messenger. How would I know!"
She exhaled and calmed herself down.
"This is actually a confusion caused by having the same name. Compared to ordinary contracted creatures that can only be summoned by oneself, it's indeed easy for a messenger that can be summoned by others to have such problems. However, because I don't have a messenger, I'm not sure if there's a special mechanism to avoid such mistakes. I can only use my knowledge to attempt an analysis.
"First, very few people have a messenger. The probability of having the same name is so low that it's almost negligible.
"Second, if there's an overlap in names, you can place an item with the messenger's owner's aura in the summoning ritual and use it to accurately lock onto them.
"Third, if you're really afraid of having the same name, you can make your name longer when signing a contract. For example, Lumian Torres Arri Lanos Arthur Gehrman Sparrow Lee. That way, you probably won't have the same name."
"But it's very likely that I'll forget this name after signing the contract. It's too difficult to remember," Lumian muttered. "Also, why did you add the name of the Pirate Hunter and Great Adventurer?"
"Because I like it. Madam Fors Wall's adventurer series is a classic," Aurore said confidently.
She turned around and tidied up the altar, preparing to officially hold the summoning ritual.
At that moment, Lumian thought of something and shouted, "Wait a minute!"

"What's wrong?" Aurore turned around, looking confused.
Lumian asked seriously, "Does the messenger count as an outsider?"
"..." Aurore was confused at first, but quickly figured out the problem.
She deliberated and asked, "You mean that as an outsider, the messenger will fall into a cycle after coming to Cordu and won't be able to leave?"
Without waiting for Lumian's reply, Aurore came up with a new theory.
"No, the situation will be worse. It's a contracted creature. After receiving the letter, it will immediately go to Hela. It's equivalent to leaving Cordu. That will cause a restart.
"After that, it will instinctively attempt to leave again and again, while we restart again and again. We won't have time to investigate the key to the loop."
Lumian couldn't help but imagine the scene his sister had described.
Just as he opened his eyes to see his familiar bedroom, he would open his eyes again to see the familiar bedroom. Only to open his eyes again to see the familiar bedroom... He would repeat this action countless times, and the root cause of this was that a certain messenger was in a hurry to "go home."
Aurore raised her hand to cover her forehead.
"I can't even imagine what kind of changes will happen then..."
After sighing, she analyzed seriously, "From the current situation, the departure of living things from Cordu and the surrounding area will cause the loop to restart, and inanimate objects won't trigger the restrictions. The telegram and the letter that were sent are proof.
"If that's the case, spirits definitely won't do either. From the looks of it, I can't summon the messenger."
Lumian suddenly figured out why the livre bleu could maintain its state of having its words cut out.
The pieced together notes had left Cordu, making it no longer affected. Since it couldn't return, it naturally couldn't return to its original state!
He shared his speculation with his sister and asked, "The problem with livre bleu has been solved, but how did that letter get sent?
"There's definitely no way to send it out during the loop. The moment the messenger leaves Cordu, it will cause a reboot. And if it's before the loop, I have no impression of it. What about you?"
"Neither do I," Aurore thought for a few seconds before jokingly scolding, "You idiot, you almost led me astray. It's easy to send the

letter in a loop!"
Lumian looked at his smart sister and asked, "Huh?"
Aurore chuckled before explaining, "There's no need for a postman to send the letter, nor is there a need to hire a messenger.
"When we discover an abnormality and don't want to alarm those who might be problematic, the best choice is to find a wooden box and place the distress letter inside. After sealing it, we will throw the wooden box into the river outside the village and let it float downstream naturally. When the other villages and even the people of Darième pick it up, they will help us deliver it to the officials.
"You said that our last cycle confirmed that the loop contains a small portion of the river that can be reached."
"That's right!" Lumian exclaimed, pressing his palms together.
He thought of another question.
"Will the fish in the river cause a reboot?"
"I don't think so," Aurore replied after thinking for a moment. "These creatures without any intelligence are very sensitive to invisible restrictions. Or rather, they're more prone to invisible influences. There's a high chance that they'll instinctively stay away from places that might cause a reboot."
"What about your White Paper? It has no choice but to leave the real world after twelve hours." Lumian felt that this would also restart the cycle.
Aurore looked around and said thoughtfully, "I suspect that the loop not only includes Cordu and the surrounding mountainous areas but also the area that corresponds to everyone here in the spirit world.
"You probably don't know that there are actually more natural interactions between the spirit world and reality. If you don't include the corresponding spirit world, it might restart every now and then, but the current situation is clearly different.
"As my contracted creature, White Paper has a direct connection with Cordu. The spirit world it roams is most likely included."
I still don't know enough about mysticism... Lumian didn't ask further.
Aurore demonstrated the ritualistic magic process again and dispelled the wall of spirituality.
In the formless wind that suddenly blew, she said to Lumian, "It's already dark. I'll teach you true Cogitation and the way to activate Spirit Vision."
"Okay!" Lumian replied, showing that he had his sister's full attention.
Aurore explained, "You've long grasped the first half of Cogitation.

Let's start from the second half. When you imagine the Sun, retract your spirit and enter a relatively calm state. Let your mind be slightly empty. Draw an outline of something that doesn't exist in reality to replace the Sun. Keep drawing and repeating until your body and mind obtain peace. Your thoughts will have a feeling that they are floating."

Lumian didn't quite understand. "Something that doesn't exist in reality?"

Aurore took out a pen and paper and drew a few strokes. "Look, is there anything like this in reality?" The paper had something very abstract on it, like a ball with eyes and a cross on its face. "Doesn't it exist once you draw it? This drawing is in reality."

Lumian felt that her sister's explanation was wrong. "Pictures and imaginations aren't real."

Aurore rolled her eyes. As her younger brother's teacher, she had to suffer this kind of anger often. Lumian acknowledged her comment tersely. "Then I'll try using this picture of yours." He pulled up a chair and sat down. He leaned back and focused.

The crimson sun quickly outlined itself in his mind, gradually calming him down. After a while, because he was in reality, he did not hear the terrifying and mysterious voice. He could calmly use the pattern that his sister had casually drawn to replace the Sun in Cogitation. The ball with eyes and a cross quickly appeared in Lumian's mind. As Lumian repeatedly outlined it, his body and heart became more and more peaceful, and his thoughts gradually felt ethereal.

He "saw" that there was a faint gray fog around him. There were many indescribable, non-existent things, and dense colored blocks mixed together. And high in the sky, *perhaps deep in the depths*, *there was a clear light.*

"There's no hurry. The probability of a Hunter succeeding in Cogitation on their first try is very low," Aurore consoled her brother.

Just as Lumian was about to report to his sister that he had successfully entered a Cogitation state, he suddenly felt something watching him from the depths of the gray fog and an infinite height! This seemed to be an illusion, but it made him break out in a cold sweat. He felt an inexplicable fear and immediately left the Cogitation state.

Chapter 50: Observation

Aurore had intended to reassure him that non-spellcasting Sequences usually took several attempts at Cogitation to succeed. Some even had to practice for five or six days or even more than half a month. However, when she saw her brother open his eyes, she noticed that Lumian's forehead was drenched in cold sweat, and fear was evident in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Aurore asked, concerned.

Lumian took a couple of deep breaths. The more he thought about it, the more frightened he became.

"I successfully Cogitated. My mind seemed to float, surrounded by a myriad of colors and an indescribable faint gray fog. There were a few particularly bright and pure beams of light up above. No, it might not have been the sky. It could have been far away. I can't be certain."

"From your description, it seems like you succeeded," Aurore explained. "What your Astral Projection sees or senses is the spirit world. There, many concepts of reality either don't exist or are intertwined. That's why you feel like you're high in the sky yet far away at the same time.

"Those seven lights are the Seven Lights of the spirit world, mentioned in ancient texts. They're believed to be near-deity level and omniscient. Moreover, they're considered relatively friendly hidden entities. If you can grasp their complete honorific names, you can pray to them. Unfortunately, I don't know them either.

"Those indescribable things that roam everywhere belong to the spirit world, but you didn't seem to see much, nor did you perceive them clearly. This is likely a limitation of the Hunter Sequence. Your spirituality isn't high enough. Hmm... Activating Spirit Vision later will probably prove difficult. The final effect certainly won't be impressive. Still, it's better than nothing."

She had been monitoring her brother's condition, ready to intervene and assist him at any moment.

Seeing Lumian gradually return to normal, she finished what she needed to say in one breath and asked, "But what you saw shouldn't have scared you. Aren't you known as Bold Lumian? Lately, you've experienced a time loop, people turning into sheep, men giving birth, and Madame Night's patrols. How can ordinary spirit world creatures frighten you?"

Lumian's forehead veins twitched at his sister's words. He didn't want to recall anything, especially anything related to Madame Pualis.

He exhaled and said, "I sensed something deep within the spirit

world, or rather, extremely high up, observing me. Just being watched by it terrifies me. I couldn't help but exit the Cogitation state."
Aurore's eyelashes flickered as she thoughtfully said, "I suspect that it has something to do with the two strange symbols on your chest you mentioned. They involve some hidden entity. They might point to the source of Cordu's loop, or they might represent the 'special' trait that allows you to maintain your clarity and strength in the dream and the loop. As a Hunter, you succeeded in complete Cogitation on your first attempt. It's highly likely that the two symbols influenced this."
Lumian nodded as he listened, agreeing with his sister.
This realization left him somewhat disheartened.
"In that case, I can't Cogitate. As soon as I succeed, I'll be watched and forced to leave that state. Besides, I don't think being constantly monitored is a good thing."
"Do you think you aren't being watched now?" Aurore couldn't help but laugh. "It's just that you can't sense it without being in a state of Cogitation. Since there's no way to evade it and you're bound to suffer damage, it's better to make more attempts to increase your resistance, allowing you to spend more time in Cogitation. In the future, when facing certain situations, this might give you an edge. Of course, before becoming a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac, Hunters don't need deep Cogitation. It's best to wait for your spirituality to improve before trying again."
"Why does that sound a bit depressing?" Lumian had already composed himself and mocked his predicament. "Since I can't resist, I might as well enjoy it."
Aurore scoffed.
"In our current situation, I'd rather have a unique trait like yours. Even if it means facing numerous unknown dangers and challenges, at least I can retain my memory during the next cycle. I wouldn't need you to remind me, sparing many details."
She then looked out the darkened window.
"It's time to teach you how to activate Spirit Vision.
"Keep sitting and attempt Cogitation again. You don't have to enter a state where your thoughts are floating. Although that would be more conducive to activating your Spirit Vision, aren't there hidden entities watching you?"
"Yeah." Lumian leaned back in his chair, relaxing his body. He first envisioned the Sun in his mind, then swapped it out for the ball his sister had sketched haphazardly.
He didn't repeat the outlining process, stopping only when his body and mind were serene.

Aurore monitored his condition, offering a soothing voice.
"Lift your hands in your current state and place them in front of your eyes. You can open your eyes now."
Lumian kept his cool as he slowly opened his eyes. At some point, his sister had snuffed out the kerosene lamp, casting the first floor into darkness. The crimson moonlight outside the window was the only thing illuminating the outlines of objects.
Once his eyes adjusted, he could barely see his hands.
"Point your index fingers at each other without touching. Then, concentrate on the back of your hand, which can be the back of the opposite point," Aurore instructed. "After completing this step, slowly move your fingers to keep them facing each other without touching. And remember, they can't leave your sight."
Lumian followed her guidance, focusing his gaze on the empty space beyond his hands as he moved his fingers.
Despite repeating the process countless times, he saw no changes.
Soon after, he couldn't sustain the Cogitation state and snapped out of it.
"See anything?" Aurore asked.
Lumian shook his head.
"It's harder for Hunters. Don't stress. If it doesn't work now, it'll work later. If it doesn't happen today, it might happen tomorrow," Aurore consoled. "Don't fret. Regular folks with high spirituality can activate their Spirit Vision after professional training, let alone Beyonders. But the results vary."
If this loop fails, I can try again next time, but if that doesn't work, there may not be another chance... Lumian thought to himself.
He was patient and resilient. After resting and regaining some strength, he tried again.
After multiple attempts, he finally saw a fiery red dot emerge from the void between his index fingers.
Success! Lumian was thrilled. He turned to his sister.
But then he saw a red light radiating from Aurore's body, encompassing it entirely.
"Didn't you say you could see the different colors of the Ether Body?" Lumian asked, confused.
Aurore asked excitedly, "Did it work?"
Lumian nodded and recounted his experience.
"It's a success," Aurore breathed a sigh of relief. "You're impressive. It's probably due to your 'special' enhancement. Other Hunters would need at least two weeks of practice, and some might have to reach Sequence 8 before they can activate their Spirit Vision easily. You can only see a vague Ether Body. The red color means I'm healthy. You won't be able to see much else with your Soul Body's

current strength as a Hunter."
She pulled out a tiny ink bottle and unscrewed the cap.
"Let's see if you can see White Paper."
Lumian focused and saw a transparent bubble emerge from the bottle.
It was similar to the bubbles he made while blowing soapy water, about the size of a fist and tinted red by the moonlight.
He could barely keep track of it and feared losing sight if he blinked.
The bubble floated towards Aurore's palm, which she scratched with her thumb, causing it to contract and expand.
Lumian composed himself and reported what he saw to his sister.
"It's blurry?" Aurore shook her head. "A Hunter's Spirit Vision is limited. You can only perceive basic Ether Body concepts and creatures like White Paper. Most things are invisible."
"It's better than nothing," Lumian replied with what his sister had just said.
Having never experienced a stronger Spirit Vision, he was rather content with his current situation.
Aurore instructed Lumian to use Cogitation to stop his Spirit Vision from deactivating and to establish simple activation and deactivation triggers.
Lumian practiced repeatedly until he mastered the method but never succeeded in the "express key" Aurore mentioned. He only vaguely understood the concept.
"Take a break. We'll monitor the deputy padre later for any anomalies," Aurore advised, noticing Lumian's pale face from depleted spirituality. She urged him to rest.
They ascended to the second floor and lit the lamp in the study.
Lumian dozed off in a recliner while Aurore read, waiting for night to deepen.
Lumian quickly fell asleep in the recliner, while Aurore casually read her book, waiting for the night to get deeper.
Lumian eventually fell asleep and forced himself to remain sleeping instead of exploring the dream world.
Aurore woke him up shortly after.
"We can observe the deputy padre now."
"Okay." Lumian sat up and faced his sister.
Aurore opened a miniature ink bottle and stroked White Paper with her right hand, her eyes darkening.
With the aid of the contract, she recited in Hermes, "My contracted creature, bear the uniqueness of my eyes."
Lumian couldn't understand or see anything without his Spirit Vision. He waited patiently.

In mere seconds, Aurore withdrew her hand and sat down.
"White Paper is on its way to the deputy padre's house."
Lumian inspected the scene and noticed that his sister's eyes reflected trees swaying in the dark, not the study or himself.
The trees were left behind swiftly.
That's what White Paper sees? Lumian realized.
Aurore took out a mirror coated in mercury and sprinkled it with light white powder.
The powder quickly bloomed with light, covering the mirror with an aqueous layer.
In the water, the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, appeared.
White Paper had reached the target's room and peered through a glass window.
Michel Garrigue slept soundly, his eyes closed and breathing steady.
Aurore and Lumian waited patiently, observing from all angles with White Paper.
Suddenly, Michel opened his mouth slightly, and a blurry, transparent figure emerged.
It was a lizard-like thing.

Chapter 51: Temporal Node

The thing that slithered out of Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue's mouth was slender and covered in scaly brownish-green skin, like a diaphanous and fuzzy lizard.

As soon as it left Michel's body, its dark green vertical eye darted left and right, vigilantly sizing up its surroundings.

While doing so, it even peered out the window but didn't detect White Paper. Instead, Lumian and Aurore sensed the coldness and indifference in its eyes.

"What's this?" Lumian asked.

Aurore shook her head.

"I don't know. It looks like a special spirit."

Lumian immediately judged, "It sure doesn't look like something good!"

Even through White Paper and the mirror, the lizard-like creature still made him feel uneasy, and his hair stood on end.

Aurore glanced at him and reminded, "This lizard seems to possess an ability that leads to a degree of mental corruption. Just looking at it from afar makes one feel uncomfortable. If you stare at it for too long, you might end up with mental problems. You must be careful. If the discomfort is serious, immediately close your eyes and try Cogitation. Get your mind right before looking again."

"It's fine for now," Lumian tersely acknowledged. "What about you? Don't you feel uncomfortable?"

Aurore smiled and replied, "As a Mystery Pryer, I've seen things more corrupting than this. My resistance is much higher than yours.

"Besides, don't I go crazy occasionally? It doesn't seem to matter even if I go crazier a little more intensely and frequently."

"I think it's necessary to check your mental state when you said that last sentence," Lumian said, half concerned and half joking.

Aurore chuckled. "That's called being self-deprecating.

"Sometimes, it's not as if I can stop looking just because I want to. The Mystery Pryer's eyes are special and can't be completely sealed. I can only barely prevent it from affecting my daily life."

As the siblings spoke, the blurry lizard-like creature crawled along the wall and floor at an extremely fast speed to the bottom floor of the house.

A few animal skulls hung on the wall opposite the door on the first floor. They were from wolves, deer, and wild boars. The deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, wasn't a Cordu native. He ought to have lived in the cathedral, but Guillaume Bénet had prevented him from doing so using an excuse. He could only rent a place from the

hunter, Sabaté.
The lizard burrowed into the wolf's skull and kept entering and exiting the socket.
Not long after, it switched to the wild boar's skull and continued doing the same thing.
After coming out of the deer's pale-white skull, the "lizard" crawled out of the house at a speed several times faster than a galloping horse. White Paper quietly floated in the night sky and followed it.
The "lizard" crawled all the way out of the village and finally arrived at the square.
It circled around the cathedral and arrived at the cemetery before plunging into a grave.
Ten seconds later, it crawled out and entered another tomb with a tombstone.
Just like that, the strange lizard-like creature moved through different graves. Lumian could even imagine the scene of it entering and exiting different human skulls in the coffins.
That scene made Lumian's skin protrude with tiny goosebumps. He couldn't help but ask, "What is this guy doing?"
Incomprehensible!
Aurore slowly shook her head. "It's a blind spot in my knowledge."
After "touring" the cemetery, the lizard-like diaphanous creature returned the way it came and entered Michel Garrigue's room.
It burrowed into Michel's mouth and disappeared.
After 20 to 30 seconds, Michel Garrigue opened his eyes and sat up. He gulped down water from the cup on the bedside table, looking extremely parched.
He put down the cup, wiped his mouth, and fell back to sleep.
Aurore turned her head and looked at Lumian.
"How is it? There's indeed something wrong with him, right?"
"How is this a problem? This is a huge problem!" Lumian didn't hide his emotions in front of his sister. "Pierre Berry, who grazes humans, the padre whose key to the time loop, Madame Pualis, who makes men give birth, Naroka, who went to Paramita, an owl who has lived for countless years, and the deputy padre who has a lizard living in him. Aren't there too many extraordinary individuals in Cordu?"
During the loop, Lumian had griped about how little help Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, the three official investigators, had been. In hindsight, *how could he blame them?* The abnormalities in Cordu were truly exceptional!
They might have taken action, but the results were probably unsatisfactory.
Aurore glanced at her brother, half-warning and half-teasing, "You

haven't mentioned the most remarkable person yet.
"The only one in the village who can remember the loop and possess a unique dream ruin."
"..." Lumian was speechless and felt a headache brewing.
Aurore turned to the mirror on the table, contemplating.
"I don't expect any significant changes with the deputy padre. Although I could examine his Astral Projection more thoroughly, it could be hazardous.
"It's fine if it endangers me because I'll be another living Warlock in the next cycle, but we need more information. We should wait until we have enough before prying deeper. Starting the loop prematurely would waste time explaining and communicating."
Lumian agreed, sharing her perspective.
Aurore then suggested, "I plan on having White Paper monitor the padre now."
"..." Lumian was taken aback. "Didn't you just say we shouldn't pry deeper to avoid triggering the abnormality prematurely?"
The padre was the linchpin to the mystery. Wasn't it reckless to rush in like that?
Aurore smiled at Lumian. "I'm sure what I'm doing is safe."
Noticing Lumian's confusion and worry, she elaborated, "You heard the padre and Pons Bénet's private conversation on April 1st during the previous cycle. The padre claimed to be an ordinary person, but he had a way to deal with me, a Beyonder.
"Based on the corresponding scene and the fact that there was no reason to lie to an ordinary person like you, I believe the padre was truly powerless before April 1st. Today is March 29th, and we haven't crossed midnight, so it's safe to spy on him."
Lumian felt relieved. "That makes sense."
Aurore continued, "From their conversation, I deduced that the padre found a way to quickly gain Beyonder powers on April 1st. If he senses danger, he can become a Beyonder instantly. Maybe he has an item that can deal with me.
"Additionally, the padre's strength at the Lent celebration didn't match that of a Sequence 9. I suspect he's taking a path beyond the divine paths the mysterious woman mentioned. He's probably praying to a certain entity for a blessing. Otherwise, he wouldn't have grown so powerful in just a few days without any noticeable inclination to losing control."
Lumian listened quietly and suddenly recalled something.
"On the morning of Lent during that cycle, I had just become a Hunter when I ran into Pons Bénet. I wanted to test myself by fighting him, but he ran away as if he knew I had become a Beyonder beforehand.

"Maybe he had also received a blessing and could sense danger..." Lumian added another crucial point.
"It was probably April 3rd when I saw Pons Bénet enter Naroka's house during her funeral.
"If he had already received a blessing, he wouldn't have failed to detect spying from an ordinary person like me, considering his keenness on the morning of Lent."
Aurore nodded. "In other words, it's highly likely that the padre's group became Beyonders between Naroka's funeral and Lent." Between April 3rd and the morning of April 5th.
"Of course, we can't rule out the possibility of them receiving blessings in batches," Aurore added.
The situation became clearer after this discussion. Lumian smacked his forehead and sighed.
"What's wrong?" Aurore asked, confused.
Lumian praised her, "I should have discussed these things with you earlier. You're much better at analyzing than I am!"
Aurore chuckled. "You sure know how to praise me in various ways. You're inexperienced and lack knowledge, so you didn't think of it immediately. You would've discovered these details sooner or later."
Although she dismissed her brother's praise, her pleased expression was evident.
White Paper flew towards the Bénet residence at Aurore's command.
The Bénet residence was the tallest and most lavish in Cordu, aside from the cathedral and the castle's modified administrator's residence.
It was a grayish-blue three-story house with a chimney on top.
As the head of the Bénet family, the padre lived in a room on the top floor's east wing. The dark gray curtains were tightly drawn, and the master of the house appeared to be asleep.
This wasn't a problem for White Paper. It slipped through the wall and blended into the darkness in the corner.
In the room, Guillaume Bénet, who had finished his affair with Madame Pualis, was sitting in a recliner, staring at the curtain in front of the window, dressed in light-blue pajamas.
Aurore's eyes darkened, revealing Guillaume Bénet's aura.
The red, green, purple, and blue colors made Lumian dizzy.
Recalling his sister's teachings, he tried to differentiate between them and realized that the padre's body was relatively healthy except for his overzealous desires.
"What's he thinking about? Which mistress to meet tomorrow?" Lumian mocked him, even though the padre couldn't hear him.

At that moment, Guillaume Bénet stood up and punched the air in front of him.
"It's all your fault!"

Chapter 52: Entering the Ruins

"It's all your fault!
"It's all your fault!
"Damn it!
"Son of a bitch!"
Guillaume Bénet's fists continued to hit the air, his rage boiling over at a seemingly invisible creature.
His expression was twisted with hatred, and he didn't bother to suppress his emotions.
Aurore narrowed her eyes and gestured for White Paper to investigate the area.
But there was nothing there, just empty air.
Lumian clicked his tongue in annoyance. "He's been itching for a fight for a while now. Who's he blaming?"
Aurore shook her head and casually replied, "Maybe it's a bishop holding him back, stopping him from rising in rank and gaining extraordinary abilities. Or perhaps someone lured him into secretly worshiping a hidden entity, hoping to receive blessings and grow stronger..."
She considered that, as the sub-deacon of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, a priest overseeing a rural cathedral, establishing contact with a concealed being wouldn't be easy on his own.
When it came to matters of supernatural power, he'd undoubtedly turn to the Dariège region's Church. The associated occult artifacts and sorcery grimoires would be handed over to the Inquisition for safekeeping or even sealing. They wouldn't be left at Cordu's cathedral. More importantly, it was impressive enough that he could command ancient Feysac. Languages capable of summoning supernatural forces like Hermes and Elvish weren't something a sub-deacon like him would encounter. And Aurore, through the Eye of Mystery Prying, had long determined he wasn't someone with innate spiritual prowess who could unintentionally attract malevolence.
Thus, without a certain someone's "guidance," how could the padre come into contact with a hidden existence?
Aurore considered the possibility that Guillaume Bénet had come into possession of a mysterious item without turning it over.
Lumian laughed at the idea.
"Can't the padre gripe over that hidden existence? He even dared to make Saint Sith feel aggrieved. It's not impossible for him to blame that hidden existence for enticing him."
After mocking Guillaume Bénet, Lumian analyzed seriously, "I've been thinking about why the padre suddenly fell into corruption.

There are two suspects. The first is Madame Pualis. She's obviously very powerful. Whether it's Louis Lund, who gave birth in the castle, or the woman suspected to be her in the wilderness surrounded by the undead, it shows that she's not simple. She's involved with abnormal pathways and hidden existences. It's possible that she enticed the padre."
"By the way..."
Lumian smacked his head.
"What's wrong?" Aurore didn't know what her brother had realized.
Lumian replied solemnly, "Do you think the padre has ever given birth to Madame Pualis' child?"
"..." Aurore was filled with regret for believing her brother was on the brink of an important discovery.
She snapped, "Who told you that Louis Lund's child is Madame Pualis's?
"What if it's Administrator Béost's or a hidden existence's? No, no. If it was, you would have exploded and turned into a monster when you saw that scene."
"I just find Madame Pualis to be more dominant in her relationship with the administrator." Before the loop began, Lumian felt that the administrator, Béost, was a little weak. He couldn't keep the butler in check and couldn't keep an eye on his wife. When he appeared with Madame Pualis, he always tried to please the latter.
Lumian originally thought that the administrator loved his wife very much, but now, he had a new guess.
"Do you think the administrator is another fertility tool for Madame Pualis?"
"Perhaps." Aurore held her forehead. "The world of mysticism has really broadened my horizons. Many scenes that only exist in novels and imaginations have been realized... in some warped manner..."
After sighing, she muttered to herself, "There seem to be more than one or two children born in the castle. Where are they?"
Lumian thought for a moment and expressed that he had no idea.
Infiltrating the castle and conducting a search was out of the question. Not after what happened to Louis Lund and the events in the wilderness. Whatever it took, he wasn't about to cross paths with Madame Pualis again.
Aurore felt the same. After their run-in with Madame Pualis, the siblings wanted nothing more than to avoid her at all costs.
The padre grunted in frustration, downing a glass of red wine to take the edge off. As he stormed over to the bed, Lumian whispered to Aurore,

He let out a long breath, put down the tall glass, and walked to the bed.
It wasn't until the padre's breathing eased and he seemed to be asleep that Lumian mocked,
"Look at him, crashing early. What, no late night rendezvous with his mistress? Oh, he doesn't smoke in private, either."
This was inferred from the absence of cigar cases, pipe, and other items in the bedroom.
Aurore chuckled and said, "He doesn't drink much alcohol either. Everyone says he's a pillar of propriety."
She dispatched White Paper to scout the bedroom. Finding nothing, it returned as instructed. Aurore turned to Lumian.
"You only mentioned one suspect. What about the other?"
"That sneaky owl. Always watching, never acting." Lumian voiced his guess. "It might have led the padre to the legendary Warlock's legacy."
"Mmm." Aurore felt that the possibility was quite high.
Lumian then suggested, "If that owl pays me another visit, we capture it and interrogate it."
"You sure you can take down an owl that has lived for centuries?" Aurore smirked.
"I've got you, haven't I?" Lumian flattered his sister.
Aurore scoffed. "Our chances aren't great, even with both of us."
"But we can't just sit around and do nothing. We need to find out what's going on before it's too late. As long as we don't interfere with the advent of the twelfth night, we'll be fine."
Lumian nodded heavily.
Aurore noticed his exhaustion and reached for White Paper, who had returned.
"You've been using your Spirit Vision too much today. Get some rest. We'll continue tomorrow."
She paused for a moment before continuing, "In the morning, I'll teach you the basics of the Hermes language. Then, in the afternoon, go see Pierre Berry and have a drink. I'll sneak into his sheep pen and see if I can get any useful information from his three sheep."
She thought this was the easiest route to investigate.
"Isn't that too risky?" Lumian asked, already on his feet.
Aurore reassured him with a smile.
"Don't worry, I won't pick a fight. I just need to talk to them in Highlander. It shouldn't raise any alarms. They might know something useful."
Lumian nodded.
"I'll head to Ol' Tavern tomorrow afternoon. I'll try to get to know

the three foreigners. They could be valuable allies."
Of course, he had to be careful not to reveal their identities as Beyonders.
"Okay," Aurore agreed with her brother's plan.
.....
Lumian woke up in his dream bedroom, shrouded in a faint gray fog.
As he expected, all the gold, silver, and copper coins, as well as the axe and pitchfork he had collected, were gone.
The cycle had reset the dream.
I have to gather them again... Lumian muttered to himself as he left the bedroom and headed to the study.
He picked up the livre bleu from the table and flipped through it idly. Many of the words had been cut out.
Indeed, I was the one to send the request for help... He no longer felt anything about being the one who had sent the request for help.
He suspected that Aurore had guided him in sending the request. After all, he had no knowledge of mysticism back then, so he would have relied on a reliable messenger or a postman.
Speaking of which, Lumian realized that the postman who came once a week wasn't in the loop.
He figured that the officials probably prevented ordinary people from entering Cordu after receiving the letter.
Lumian looked around for a box to store the letter, but he couldn't remember how many similar items Aurore had in her collection, so he gave up.
He got dressed in a way that didn't affect his movements, grabbed his iron-black axe, and headed out into the wilderness filled with crevices. He walked towards the ruins surrounding the dark red mountain peak.
Lumian easily dispatched the two familiar monsters. He slung the shotgun, cloth bag of lead rounds, and assortment of coins.
He moved forward cautiously, deliberately avoiding the path he had taken before, knowing that he was not prepared to face the three-faced monster.
As he made his way through the collapsed buildings and thin gray fog, the constantly alert him took a sniff.
He caught a whiff of blood.
After some thought, Lumian sneaked into the shadows and hid in a hidden space on the top of a half-collapsed house, peering through a gap between a few rocks.
In the distance, amidst the barren, rubble-filled wasteland, he saw a lump of flesh slowly wriggling towards a building.

The flesh was mixed with yellow fat, as if a creature had been crushed by a falling boulder.

Lumian pondered how to deal with such a monster. *Should I behead it?* But it doesn't even have a head.

Suddenly, several dark-black, fleshy ropes appeared out of nowhere and bound the blob of flesh tightly.

Chapter 53: Mark

Tentacles? Lumian was momentarily dumbstruck before recognizing the appendages that ensnared the fleshy mass.

He knew Aurore's novels well and had seen all the illustrations. Not only did he recall every melodramatic scene, but he also grasped concepts typically beyond his ken, such as monstrous tentacles.

Seven or eight inky tendrils enveloped the fleshy lump, dragging it towards the crumbled building.

A figure emerged from the chaos of strewn rubble.

The creature bore a humanoid form, its upper body and feet bare, clad only in black pants.

But it lacked a head, sporting only a remnant of a neck. A whirl of razor-sharp teeth filled the cross-section, and its crimson skin gleamed between them.

Lumian couldn't help but imagine a human whose head and half their neck had been replaced by some bizarre, gaping orifice. He shook his head, unable to locate a weak point for attack.

Seven or eight fleshy tentacles sprouted from the monster's maw, swiftly hauling the fleshy mass before it and hoisting it up.

The creature's neck-mouth blossomed open like a morning glory.

Its pearly, needle-like teeth clamped onto the flesh, swallowing it whole like a snake devouring its prey.

Lumian scoffed silently.

So, you still need to eat. Thought you guys could survive without food...

He then fell into deep thought.

Monsters should be common in these ruins. Food must be scarce...

So some monsters feed on others, like now. Or maybe, everyone's both hunter and prey...

Could I lure an unbeatable monster to others and exploit the chaos?

Theoretically, yes. But it's risky. They might just team up to kill me first...

As Lumian mulled it over, he noticed the monster's chest—heaving from the effort of digestion—was beginning to swell and contract, as though it was undergoing intense digestion.

This attracted Lumian's attention and made him realize that the monster's chest was anything but ordinary.

Three black, seal-like marks adorned its pectorals and base of the neck.

Wh— Lumian's pupils dilated instinctively, straining for a better look.

He'd seen something similar on the padre!

At the end of the Lent celebration, the padre's body had swelled, tearing his clothes to reveal a black mark!
Upon closer inspection, Lumian confirmed that the three black seals on the monster matched the padre's.
Composed of cryptic words and symbols, they seemed to connect with an ineffable realm.
The difference? The padre bore at least 11 or 12 marks, whereas the monster had only three.
What's the deal with these marks? Are they bestowed by a hidden power? And the more you have, the greater the boon? Lumian wondered, perplexed.
He tried in vain to memorize the markings but couldn't in such a short time. Without pen or paper, he couldn't reproduce them either.
The monster finished digesting the fleshy mass. It swung its arm, shaking the fleshy tentacles beside its mouth-orifice.
The mark beneath its neck glimmered, and a low hum emanated from its chest.
The sound swelled, evoking a maelstrom of air tearing through a beehive, whistling in and out of countless tunnels.
The trumpet-like orifice gaped wide, amplifying the maddening drone.
The cacophony grated on Lumian's nerves, making him itch to pummel the beast.
Your noise is unbearable, you know that?
As rage coursed through his veins, Lumian acted on impulse, leaping from the partially collapsed rooftop, shotgun in hand.
Bang!
Lumian hit the ground hard, his eyes locking onto the monster's gaping maw filled with razor-sharp teeth.
He was about to rip the other party a new one for being a stubborn old pig, but serenity gripped him like a vice. He felt helpless, like a bystander who had been thrust onto the stage of a deadly play.
The monster's blood-red mouth was trained on him, and it made no sound.
"Can I say that I'm sorry, that it's a misunderstanding?" he muttered, his voice barely audible.
He suspected that there was something wrong with the noise just now, causing him to lose his mind. He jumped out of his hiding spot and tried to attack!
But it was too late for apologies. He had to make a choice: fight or flee.
With his experience, Lumian knew that running was not an option. The monster was unscathed and ready, its eight tentacles

raised and poised for attack.
Therefore, if he really wanted to escape, he had to fight before finding an opportunity!
If he wanted to survive, he had to fight. Without hesitation, Lumian raised the shotgun in his hand, loaded with lead bullets.
Bang!
The monster was caught off guard by Lumian's speed and decisiveness. It had no idea what the shotgun was and didn't stand a chance as it was pelted with lead bullets.
"Ah!"
it howled in pain, its mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth opening instinctively. Its chest was a bloody mess, including the black mark on its right side,
However, the black mark seemed to be engraved in his blood and flesh. It was still clearly visible and remained unharmed.
Lumian didn't revel in the monster's screams. He quickly repositioned himself and pulled out a new round from his bag.
But before he could take aim again, the black mark on the creature's left side glowed, and it vanished into thin air.
Just like that, it disappeared in front of Lumian!
Had it escaped or turned invisible? He racked his brain for answers from the various novels Aurore had written and the mysticism knowledge she had taught.
Lumian searched frantically for any sign of it, but it was gone.
This scene and difficulty that he had never faced before made Lumian panic. He wanted to take the opportunity to escape and subconsciously take a few steps back.
Lumian's ankles were suddenly yanked, and he lost his balance, flipping over and hanging upside down.
Dark, fleshy tentacles appeared out of nowhere, wrapping tightly around Lumian's legs and hoisting him up.
The monster was right in front of him, its black mark glowing on its right side. The vortex-shaped mouth filled with white, razor-sharp teeth widened to reveal a blood-red interior.
The stench was overwhelming, and Lumian felt dizzy as he hung upside down.
He could see the blood-colored skin of the monster's mouth and countless teeth.
Thinking quickly, he grabbed one of the tentacles and wrapped it tightly around his arm. In his hanging state, he aimed his shotgun at the monster's mouth and fired.
Bang!
The monster screamed as flesh and blood spewed from its mouth.
It flung Lumian away, and its body turned transparent before

vanishing once again.
Lumian hit the ground and rolled before getting back up, determined to find his target.
Suddenly, he caught a whiff of blood approaching him.
Without hesitation, he leaped in the opposite direction.
Dark tentacles emerged from the air where he had been standing, but they missed their mark.
The monster reappeared three to four meters away, its vortex-shaped mouth wide open, ready to strike.
Lumian loaded his shotgun with lead rounds, but the black mark on the monster's left side glowed, and it vanished again.
Invisibility. It's indeed invisibility! Lumian instantly made a judgment.
Coupled with his previous encounter, he believed that this invisibility could not hide his scent and would lose its effect once he entered an attack state.
After figuring it out, Lumian calmed down and mocked inwardly,
How can you be invisible if you can't even hide your scent?
Capturing traces was a Hunter's forte.
Lumian regained his composure and calmly surveyed his surroundings as he circled the area.
Soon, he spotted the monster's footprints and caught the scent of blood and its unmistakable stench.
Using these clues, he dodged the monster's attacks and fired his shotgun, but it seemed to have no vital points. The creature only grew weaker after being hit multiple times.
With the lead rounds running low, Lumian quickly thought of a solution.
In just a few seconds, he had an answer.
He had scouted the area beforehand and found several natural traps that could be used, including one that would be perfect for this monster.
As two faint footprints appeared in the distance, Lumian turned and ran, narrowly avoiding the dark, fleshy tentacle that missed its target.
He kept running, occasionally looking back to make sure the monster was still chasing him and to dodge any attacks.
Buzz, buzz, buzz!
The monster's "noise" only fueled Lumian's anger, making him want to turn around and attack with his axe. But he reminded himself that his goal was to kill the creature, not just vent his frustration.
Fortunately, he remembered that his goal in running was to kill that guy. At the moment, he wasn't really running away. Anger

and frustration didn't change his plan. It only made him more motivated.
Thud thud thud!
Finally, he spotted the half-collapsed building and rushed inside, stopping at the edge and pretending to lie in ambush.
Soon, he heard the shallow footprints of the monster approaching, along with its stench and blood.
Lumian estimated the distance of the tentacle and took a couple of steps back. With a swing of his axe, he struck a stone pillar that was about to collapse, and then kicked it hard, using the reaction force to roll back.
The half-collapsed building couldn't withstand the impact and crumbled, a cascade of heavy rocks filling the passage. Boom!
The monster, hiding and ready to attack, let out a fierce scream that lasted only a second before it was silenced forever.

Chapter 54: Interpretation

Lumian rolled away before springing back to his feet.

The sudden scream and its abrupt end brought him a sense of relief.

Still, he remained vigilant. Shotgun slung and axe in hand, he cautiously approached the collapsed building.

Dust swirled in the air where bricks and wooden beams once stood, lingering on.

Outside, Lumian couldn't spot the monster's corpse. It must be buried beneath the rubble. His sense of smell was compromised in the dusty environment. He raised a hand to shield his nose from the irritants.

Given the situation, Lumian retreated several steps, maintaining a safe distance as he patiently waited for the dust to settle.

As he stood watch, he scrutinized his surroundings, on alert for any subtle signs of movement or scent.

Finally, the air cleared, and his vision returned.

Lumian neared the wreckage once more, tracking the scent of blood to find the monster crushed beneath heavy stones.

With no need to rush, he employed his Hunter expertise to methodically remove the rocks, avoiding any secondary collapse.

Simultaneously, he kept his guard up against the monster, which might still be alive and awaiting an opportunity to strike.

He pulled away another massive stone, revealing the twisted creature, its head-neck a mangled vortex.

Its maw faced the sky, crushed into a gory mess. Its chest was flattened, and its sharp mouth impaled on a jagged stone pillar. Several dark, fleshy tentacles had snapped.

If not for its distinct features, Lumian wouldn't have recognized the semi-solid mass as his target.

The trap had worked better than he'd anticipated!

After confirming the monster's demise, Lumian noticed the three black markings on its chest, still clearly visible despite the carnage.

It's so odd... This can't be common, even in mysticism, right?

Despite going through his sister's crash course, Lumian still had much to learn. He relied on his intuition for judgment.

He had planned to use his knife to remove the skin with the black mark, but the creature's chest was too mangled to salvage anything.

After pondering for a moment, he tore a piece of cloth from his linen shirt, using it as makeshift paper.

Next, he wrapped another strip around his finger, staining it with

the monster's blood. Whether it sufficiently isolated potential contamination or poison, he couldn't be sure. If anything happened, he'd have to leave the dream quickly, minimizing any damage to reality. He should recover within hours or half a day.
Using the blood as ink, Lumian copied the three black marks.
As he drew, dizziness struck, and a swelling pain pulsed in his forehead.
Lumian surmised from his sister's teachings that his spirituality was nearly depleted.
Just copying these marks almost drained me entirely?
He was astonished by the bizarre markings and the meager spiritual capacity of a Hunter, which he suspected was only slightly greater than a spiritually gifted person.
After resting briefly, Lumian continued copying. It took three intermittent attempts before completion, his head throbbing.
In his current state, further exploration was impossible. He pocketed the cloth, hoisted his axe, and headed back across the wilderness towards home.
Emerging from the ruins, he felt a sense of accomplishment, as if he had absorbed a significant portion of the Hunter potion.
Looks like it was a successful hunt, Lumian mused.
His unsorted experiences bubbled to the surface.
Staying calm is crucial... When faced with unexpected prey and no time to prepare, calmness is even more vital.
Always observe your surroundings and exploit opportunities.
With his thoughts racing, Lumian made his way home, ascended to the second floor, and entered the bedroom.
He forced himself to memorize the marks for a while before collapsing on the bed in exhaustion.
.....
The next morning, when Lumian woke up, his temples were still throbbing a bit. That was a sign his spirituality had been drained in the dream ruins.
He shook his head and left the room to splash his face in the bathroom.
When he went downstairs, he realized his sister had already made breakfast—toast with jam, sliced sausages, and strong black coffee.
"So early?" Lumian blurted out in surprise.
His sister rarely woke up early.
Aurore replied grumpily, "Realizing we're stuck in a time loop, and the people around us are getting weirder and creepier, how can you sleep well? Not me."
"I've got no choice." Lumian comforted his sister. "At least you can

really sleep. I've got stuff to do in my dreams."
"That's true." Aurore picked up the coffee laced with half a packet of sugar and took a swig.
After her brother sat down and wolfed most of the toast and sausage, she asked, "What did you get out of exploring the dream ruins?"
Lumian recounted his run-in with the monster and said, "Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, help me figure out what those three black marks mean. At the end of Lent, the priest had something similar on him, but even more."
Aurore nodded and took out a fountain pen and a note from a hidden pocket in her beige dress.
Lumian began sketching, but he couldn't accurately replicate the black marks.
Soon, he handed the note to his sister and "introduced," "I only memorized it a few times. I can't be sure if some of it's right or wrong, but some of it must be. Here, here, and here are spot on."
Just replicating part of the mark had drained a lot of his spirituality.
Aurore placed the note on the dining table in front of her and focused on it for a while.
"These words aren't any I know. The symbols that go with them are more warped than those commonly seen in mysticism too."
Lumian was a little disappointed when Aurore added, "Judging by the influence of transcendent words and symbols on the surroundings and the leverage the marks have on natural power, I suspect this is the outward manifestation of a special contract."
As she spoke, she tapped the note with her index finger.
"Contract?" Lumian asked.
Aurore nodded.
"Paired with your battle with that monster, each black mark should represent a special contract.
"The effect of this contract is likely helping it gain a superpower from certain spirit world creatures, creatures from other dimensions, or extraterrestrial creatures. So, the black mark on its left chest emits light and grants invisibility. The one below its neck corresponds to a voice that makes people frustrated, resentful, and lose their minds. The one on its right chest didn't show anything. I suspect it has something to do with its mouth orifice, tentacles, or digestion."
"No wonder..." Lumian immediately understood some of the details of the previous battle.
He then laughed and said, "The padre signed more than ten contracts with different creatures?

"What does this mean? Everyone can be his daddy!"
"What a strange way to put it," Aurore muttered. "From the looks of it, the priest who fought you at the end of Lent didn't even show a tenth of his strength. He probably only used one ability he got through the contract. His body and mind went out of whack for no reason, and he was at your mercy."
Lumian didn't get the previous two cycles, but he clearly knew it was luck back then.
He eagerly asked, "Can I copy the contract obtained from the monster and contact the corresponding creature?"
He was very envious of that "invisibility" ability.
"A contract is a contract, and a ritual is a ritual. Do you know how to conduct a ritual?" Aurore doused his enthusiasm. "Even if you master the ritual, do you know what the price of such a special contract is? The padre might have only completed it with the blessing of a hidden existence..."
Aurore paused for a second and muttered to herself, "Why does the monster in your dream ruin have such a black mark... Did it also receive the blessing of that entity?"
As she spoke, Aurore cast her gaze at Lumian's left chest.
"Could it be related to the black thorn symbol sealing your heart?
"The padre had one too. Hmm... Maybe the thorn symbol represents a hidden existence that created the dream ruin. The key to breaking the cycle might be hidden there. Or, maybe reality can only solve the problem by doing something simultaneously with the dream ruin..."
"It's possible," Lumian thought, realizing that this could explain why the monster had a black mark and why the mysterious lady wanted him to explore the dream ruins.
He let out an emotional sigh.
"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, your imagination is indeed much richer than mine."
"That's what an author should be like," Aurore replied with a smile.
After breakfast, Aurore brought Lumian to the study to teach him Hermes.
They ended the lesson around three or four in the afternoon, only stopping to grab a quick bite to eat.
"Alright, you can go out and drink with Pierre Berry now," Aurore said, realizing it was time and that no one would suspect them.
Lumian acknowledged her instruction briefly and expressed his concern.
"You must be careful."
Aurore was going to take the risk of coming into contact with the three sheep to gather information.

.....
Lumian arrived at the dilapidated two-story house where Shepherd Pierre Berry lived and looked around before asking the old woman, "Where's Pierre?"
The old woman, Pierre Berry's mother, Martie, appeared to be in her early fifties but had many wrinkles due to overexertion from work. Her skin was freckled, and her black hair had turned gray. She looked almost as old as Naroka.
"He went to the cathedral," Martie replied.
Lumian was alarmed. He went to the cathedral again?

Chapter 55: Persona

If Lumian remembered correctly, Pierre Berry would undoubtedly visit the cathedral to offer his prayers past noon of March 30th. He and Reimund had crossed paths with him during the previous cycle, and Lumian had also encountered him at the village square at a similar hour.

However, it was already three or four in the afternoon!

"When did he leave?" Lumian inquired.

Martie pondered for a moment and responded, "Around the time taken to cover a mile."

In the countryside, except for a handful of people, hardly anyone owned a timepiece. Time was generally conveyed through specific activities and indications such as grape harvesting season, the duration of a mile's walk, and so forth.

Obviously, if the timeframe was brief enough for people to perceive it more distinctly, "a few minutes" and "15 minutes" would be employed in verbal expressions.

A mile? That isn't too far... Lumian speculated that Pierre Berry had already gone to the cathedral around noon and had yet to return.

One mile in Cordu was equivalent to one kilometer in the Intisian metric system.

After bidding farewell to Pierre's mother, Martie, Lumian departed from the Berry residence and proceeded towards the village square.

He was unsure whether Pierre Berry had visited the cathedral at noon and returned again in the afternoon, or if something had cropped up, delaying his return.

If it was the former scenario, Lumian could sense something brewing. It was highly unusual for Pierre Berry to frequently visit the cathedral to meet the padre. Something dreadful was certainly afoot.

If it was the latter scenario, it would be a massive problem!

Before Lumian, who retained his memories, and Aurore, who already knew the cycle, made an attempt, the history should remain unaltered!

If there were any deviations, it could indicate that the siblings had not completely comprehended the pattern of the cycles, or that there were others who could retain their memories.

With this in mind, Lumian heaved a sigh and raised his hand to strike his face.

He was so startled that he forgot to inquire if Pierre had visited the cathedral at noon.

That was crucial.

It was far too suspicious to turn back and ask now. Lumian could only obtain some information from Pierre when they drank together later. He quickly suppressed his frustration and strode towards the square.
Upon entering the cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun, he saw the padre, Guillaume Bénet, standing in front of the altar with several sunflowers. He was conversing with a few individuals seated in the front pew.
As soon as Lumian entered, Guillaume Bénet ceased speaking and glanced over.
Some plot? Lumian smiled as he approached the altar, observing the individuals listening to the padre's 'sermon.'
He spotted Shepherd Pierre Berry, the thug Pons Bénet, and a few of his henchmen. He also saw the padre's mistress, Madonna Bénet, and Sybil Berry. He was surprised to see a man here but also found it reasonable—Arnault André, Naroka's youngest son, a farmer in his forties.
"Hello, Pierre..." Lumian greeted him with a smile, but he halted midway.
The second half of his sentence was meant to be, "Aren't you buying drinks? Why are you here?" However, he suddenly became vigilant and remembered that this arrangement had yet to occur in this cycle.
This was something that had only transpired in the previous cycle. This was the first time Lumian had encountered Shepherd Pierre Berry in this cycle.
As Cordu's Prankster King, Lumian's reflexes were lightning-quick. He promptly altered his posture and extended his arms towards the altar.
"Praise the Sun!"
Keeping up the facade, his thoughts raced as he conjured up a fresh alibi.
After paying homage to the Sun and receiving a response from the priest, Lumian pivoted and addressed Pierre Berry, who sat at the front row's edge, gazing at him with bewilderment.
"I heard you had returned to the village, so I went to your dwelling to seek you out. Lo and behold, you're here in the cathedral."
He didn't specify who had informed him, knowing that Pierre Berry would have been spotted en route to the cathedral.
With no witnesses to his lie, Lumian had a fallback option—Ava's father, the cobbler Guillaume Lizier.
"Why are you looking for me?" Pierre Berry rose to his feet, clad in a dark-brown robe, his blue eyes brimming with gentle amusement and perplexity.

Lumian had already prepared a plausible excuse. He grinned and responded, "I yearn to hear your tales while tending to your flock. Diverse countries, varied hamlets, and sundry locales. They must be enthralling."
In the past, he had frequently conversed with newly-returned shepherds to enrich his knowledge.
Without waiting for Pierre Berry's reply, Lumian shifted his gaze from his disheveled and greasy black hair to his brand-new leather shoes.
"Did you make it rich?"
"My current employer was more generous this time and bestowed upon me quite a few things," Pierre Berry replied with a smile. "I'll treat you to a drink later."
"Alright." This was precisely what Lumian had been angling for.
He even inquired, "When will you be heading there?"
This displayed the panache of a regular patron of Ol' Tavern. He was unashamed when it came to cadging a glass of wine.
Pierre Berry glanced at Guillaume Bénet, the priest, and received a corresponding hint.
"How about after dinner?" he suggested.
"Agreed," Lumian assented readily.
Thereafter, under the scrutiny of the shepherd, priest, Pons Bénet, and company, he seated himself in the second pew closest to him.
"..." Pierre Berry was momentarily taken aback. "Aren't you going back?"
Lumian beamed.
"I haven't prayed in ages. I'll seize this opportunity to pray, lest the deity thinks I'm not devout enough."
"Carry on, carry on. Pretend I'm not here."
Saying so, he closed his eyes, lowered his head slightly, and crossed his arms over his chest.
Pierre Berry, Guillaume Bénet, Pons Bénet, and the rest exchanged glances, at a loss for words.
After patiently waiting for an extended period and observing Lumian still engrossed in prayer, the priest turned to Pierre Berry, gesturing for him to inquire.
Pierre Berry approached Lumian's side and patted his shoulder.
"How long do you intend to pray?"
Lumian opened his eyes and stated gravely, "I plan to pray until dinnertime. Since there's nothing else to do, I can make a confession later."
Guillaume Bénet's forehead twitched upon hearing this.
Gazing at Madonna, Sybil, Pons, Arnault, and the others waiting for him, he exhaled slowly. He signaled to Pierre Berry and

gestured towards the door.
Pierre Berry comprehended the priest's unspoken message and hastily informed Lumian, "I'm done praying. Shall we proceed to Ol' Tavern now?"
"Absolutely!" Lumian stood up, grinning from ear to ear. There was nary a hint of solemnity or piety in his demeanor.
Previously, he had discerned that his arrival had impeded the padre and his accomplices' machinations. In a mischievous attempt to play a prank, he feigned interest and lingered until Pierre Berry was required to depart prematurely.
He surmised that the padre saw through his act, but what use was being the Prankster King of Cordu if he didn't create a bit of mischief in such circumstances?
He had to maintain his persona to avoid arousing suspicion!
Lumian lamented his sister's probable departure to Berry's abode to confer with the three sheep. Had she been present, he could have dispatched White Paper to the cathedral to clandestinely overhear the padre's scheme and glean valuable intelligence.
Perhaps I can undertake this in the next cycle, but would Pierre detect our surveillance? Pierre is no simpleton. He is certainly more capable than an ordinary person like the padre... Lumian's thoughts raced as he trailed Pierre out of the cathedral and towards the Ol' Tavern.
.....
In the sheep pen behind the Berry household.
Aurore, donned in a white gown, circumnavigated the woods and vaulted the wooden fence.
As an alluring woman seldom seen in the village, she had to choose this relatively secluded path. Otherwise, she would be subjected to small talk or worse, suspicion.
When will I learn the spells of invisibility and shadow concealment? Aurore ruminated wistfully as she advanced towards the three sheep that had huddled beside a haystack.
Speaking in Highlander, she said, "Do not fret. I am the adversary of Shepherd Pierre Berry."
The eyes of the three sheep, whose coats were besmirched with filth, underwent a rapid transformation. Their initial vigilance and apprehension gave way to hope and perplexity.
Despite their initial reservations, they did not retreat and permitted Aurore to approach.
Aurore continued, "I discovered your peculiarities through certain means. You were once human, were you not?"
The eyes of the three sheep were suddenly imbued with shock, elation, hope, and skepticism. They instinctually bleated.

Aurore surveyed them.
"You cannot speak, but you can write, can you not?"
One of the sheep was stupefied for a moment before hastily inscribing on the ground.
It scribbled a simple Highlander word: "Yes."
The sheep was confirming that they were once human.
"What transpired? Why were you transformed into sheep?" Aurore pondered briefly before adding, "Write the beginning, middle, and end separately to save time."
The three sheep divided the task and inscribed different portions of the narrative on the surface of the soil using their hooves.
Before long, they had each completed a sentence.
"We were caught."
"A ritual was conducted."
"Swaddled in sheepskin and metamorphosed into sheep."
A ritualistic sorcery that can convert a human into a sheep using sheepskin? Hmph. That is decidedly easier than transfiguring a person into a sheep. The only question is, which deity was the ritual invoking? Aurore queried as her mind raced, "Did Pierre Berry capture you? Is he alone?"
She wished to ascertain Pierre Berry's current strength.
"Yes." One of the sheep responded.
The other sheep added more: "He has an accomplice. They were both exceedingly formidable."
Pierre Berry was already immensely powerful before his return to the village? Aurore suddenly detected something amiss.
Why did Pierre Berry appear to be under the sway of Guillaume Bénet, the padre?
Guillaume Bénet was still an ordinary person!

Chapter 56: Intuition

The more Aurore ruminated on the matter, the more her suspicions intensified.

How could the powerless Guillaume Bénet possibly subdue the mighty Pierre Berry, who possessed no less than supernatural abilities?

If the padre was indeed favored by the clandestine force to the extent that his clique considered him their leader, he should have been bestowed with a boon long ago and elevated above the common masses.

Should he decline the boon, he would inevitably face ostracism.

In these circumstances, his standing, authority, and machinations paled in comparison to his might or the gulf that separated him from divinity.

Aurore lacked the luxury of time to ponder this and could only conceive of two plausible explanations.

Either Guillaume Bénet was not the true leader of the small group and was merely exploiting his status to orchestrate and conceal the anomaly from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church in Darìège.

Or, he was not rejecting the boon but merely biding his time to attain greater power.

Neither explanation boded well.

Aurore directed her gaze at the three sheep and inquired, "Who was the man that accompanied Pierre Berry in his assault on you?"

The three sheep scribbled down their responses.

"Niort Best."

"A shepherd named Niort."

"He goes by the name Niort."

Niort Bastet too has achieved extraordinary power? Aurore was acquainted with the individual in question.

Niort was a fellow shepherd from Cordu who frequently grazed his flock alongside Pierre Berry. But he had seemingly not returned early this time.

"Where is Niort? I did not spot him in the village," Aurore queried.

The three sheep moved a few steps away and found a new patch of unmarked soil on which to write.

"He's dead."

"I killed him."

"We took him out, but we were apprehended."

Had he fallen victim to a counterattack? Aurore nodded pensively.

"Are all of you Beyonders?"

The three sheep ceased writing Highlander with their hooves and nodded in assent.

Aurore acknowledged them tersely as she raced to process the implications.
Pierre Berry and Niort Best are hunting Beyonders. *What is their motive?*
And one of them is now dead...
Either Niort's abilities paled in comparison to Pierre's, or they had acquired their powers through the boon and were far from proficient in wielding them. It was certain that the Beyonder battles would encounter complications...
Aurore glanced at the three sheep once more and asked, "Do you know why Pierre captured you?"
The three sheep resumed writing.
"I have heard him speak of God and devotion."
"It may be for a blood sacrifice."
"I suspect he wants to offer us as a sacrifice to an evil god."
Indeed, Beyonders possess remarkably high spirituality and unique characteristics. They are far superior to ordinary mortals as sacrificial offerings, and they can appease malevolent gods more effectively... Pierre Berry and Niort Best were using grazing sheep as a ruse to abduct Beyonders from other countries to offer them up as sacrifices? It is a scheme that can easily evade the local authorities' notice... Aurore nodded imperceptibly.
She spoke solemnly, "Did Pierre mention the honorific name of that god? Or rather, who were they praying to during the ritual that transformed you into sheep?"
The three sheep were taken aback, as if they were awash in recollections.
Suddenly, they lowered their heads and extended their hooves towards the soil before them.
For some inexplicable reason, Aurore felt that the temperature had plummeted, and the sun had been obscured by dark clouds, as a chilly mountain breeze swept past.
The three sheep began writing.
Aurore's spiritual intuition sounded a powerful alarm, prompting her to bellow, "Hold on!"
The three sheep lifted their heads and looked at her.
At some point, blood-red tears had welled up in their eyes, and their fur was stained and ghastly.
In the next moment, they resumed writing.
Aurore whirled around and dashed towards the fence.
As she exited the pen and looked back, the three sheep were bathed in the sunlight.
If not for the bloodstains on their faces, everything seemed entirely ordinary.

Thump, thump... Aurore's heart continued pounding.
Panting heavily, she breathed a sigh of relief.
If I had not learned to seal my sight and glimpsed things I should not have seen, I would not have reacted in time...
She produced a vial of iron-black powder and scattered it over the sheep pen.
The words etched in the soil vanished as though by an unseen hand.
As for the stains on the sheep's faces, Aurore found it challenging to expunge them using spells, so she refrained from approaching them and merely washed them away with water.
She feared that the three sheep were different from before and harbored latent dangers.
...
In Ol' Tavern, Lumian sat at the bar, sipping on light-green absinthe, his right elbow propped up casually as he surveyed the room.
He searched for the mysterious lady, but she was nowhere to be seen, nor were Ryan, Leah, and Valentine.
Lumian knew not when the former would arrive, and as for the latter three, he assumed they were wandering the village, engaging in idle chatter.
Pierre Berry, who had just finished his glass of absinthe, picked up a new pale green liquid and babbled, "I had a chance to get married."
"Is that so?" Lumian scoffed, "Who would fancy a shepherd?"
Pierre sighed and replied, "Most of the pastures we graze in are owned by manor owners or nearby villages. If we want to graze, we have to pay a ranch tax or marry a village girl and settle down there."
Lumian smiled. "That's a good thing for a shepherd."
Pierre took a sip of absinthe and glanced sideways at Lumian.
"That girl must fancy you and not ask for dowry.
"At one time, a lady thought I was not bad and didn't mind that I was a pauper and a shepherd. She was willing to marry me. Was she very foolish?"
"Yes." Lumian nodded "honestly."
Pierre took another sip of absinthe and was silent for a long time before saying, "Later, she died. She worked in a factory in the suburbs and fell ill due to exhaustion. I went to several cathedrals, got the priests to pray for her, and found doctors to treat her, but it was useless. After that day, I realized something."
Lumian asked, taking a swig of absinthe, "What was it?"
Resentment flashed across Pierre's face as he replied, "Those who

possess flesh and excrete from their posterior cannot absolve us of our predicament!"
Lumian asked, "So, those without flesh and those who do not excrete from their posterior are acceptable?"
Pierre chuckled. "Those are saints and angels, but will they deign to look at us?"
Lumian tsked. "Then why did you go to the cathedral to seek the padre's counsel? Not only does he possess flesh and excrete from his posterior, but he also indulges in the carnal pleasures with women."
Pierre turned his head towards Lumian and cast a sidelong glance. "You fail to comprehend. He possesses a certain intellectuality that can redeem our souls."
"Intellectuality?" Lumian struggled to grasp the term.
Pierre took another sip of his light-green absinthe, seemingly oblivious to the question.
Lumian dared not press the matter further, and instead inquired, "I heard that you visited the cathedral at noon. Why did you return in the afternoon?"
Pierre's warm smile illuminated his face as he replied, "In the afternoon, one can converse with like-minded individuals."
He did not deny that he had visited the cathedral at noon.
Lumian breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that for the time being, no one else would retain their memories and disrupt the flow of history.
He suspected that Pierre Berry had visited the cathedral at noon to confer with the padre in advance of their small group discussion scheduled for the afternoon.
After their libations and with the sun setting on the horizon, Lumian and Pierre Berry bid each other farewell and returned to their respective abodes.
Pons Bénet, the padre's younger brother, abruptly emerged with a few thugs and obstructed Lumian's way upon him reaching a secluded path.
The brawny, raven-haired, azure-eyed Pons Bénet stared at Lumian and smirked maliciously.
"You were good at pranks in ze afternoon, no? Wasting our time in ze cathedral. If ze padre wasn't there, I would have beaten you up, eh! Bastard, come and eat Daddy Pons's XX."
Initially taken aback by this imbecile's foolishness, Lumian was elated.
His and Aurore's judgment was correct. In the previous cycle, Pons Bénet likely hadn't acquired supernatural abilities before Naroka's funeral and thus had no sense of danger.

He had actually dared to obstruct a Beyonder's path!
Without hesitation, Lumian turned and bolted, with Pons and his thugs in hot pursuit.
However, as soon as they exited the trail between two buildings, they lost sight of their quarry.
Pons Bénet scanned his surroundings and ordered his subordinates, "Spread out and search."
He deemed it impossible for Lumian to have fled so swiftly and believed he was hiding nearby.
The thugs dispersed and combed the area for any potential hideouts, leaving Pons Bénet alone at the trail's entrance.
Lumian, who had ascended to the second floor of the adjacent building, chuckled and leapt towards Pons.
Bang!
Pons was sent hurtling to the ground with tremendous force, gasping for breath and momentarily incapacitated.
Had Lumian not restrained himself and struck him directly, he might have broken several bones.
Lumian stood up, clasped Pons's forearms, and smiled at him, saying, "Come, let us become better acquainted."
Before Pons could offer any resistance, Lumian pulled him into his embrace and kneed him.
Pons's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets, and his face twisted in agony.
Thud!
Lumian released him, allowing the man to crumple to the ground like a shrimp.
He then turned and darted down the trail, vanishing from sight before the thugs returned.
...
In the kitchen, which also doubled as a part-time living and dining area,
Lumian updated his sister on his situation.
"Pierre Berry visited the cathedral in the afternoon... It's confirmed that Pons Bénet still lacks any superpowers."
Aurore nodded slightly and recounted her own experience, particularly the inexplicable danger at the end.
Lumian pondered for a moment before remarking, "That enigmatic lady claimed that certain entities might corrupt you merely by acknowledging Their existence."

Chapter 57: Arrangements

Aurore recollected the situation and surmised that her brother's account was accurate.

She sighed, overcome with emotion and remarked, "To think that such dreadful corruption can be brought about by that concealed entity worshiped by Pierre Berry and his accomplices. Even the evil deities mentioned in ancient manuscripts fail to elicit such a reaction."

Lumian showed no signs of surprise and said, "Otherwise, why are we trapped in a time loop?"

The more Aurore contemplated, the more perplexed she became. She muttered, "Is it possible that we have to confront the concealed entity on the twelfth night and defeat it to end the cycle?

"This would entail gathering ingredients, digesting the potion, and undergoing repeated cycles to become a deity..."

Lumian interrupted her train of thought as he realized that his sister was becoming increasingly irrational.

"Stop! It cannot be this extreme."

Aurore acknowledged his remark tersely and nodded slightly.

"You are right. We have, at most, one more cycle. It is impossible for us to become deities within twenty days."

She then shrugged and added, "There is no hope. Let us wait for death."

"..." Even Lumian, who had an inventive mind, struggled to keep up with his sister's thoughts.

Aurore exhaled and looked at her brother. "All right, I am done venting. Continue."

"Huh?" Lumian appeared puzzled and took a few seconds to understand what his sister meant by continuing.

"By the look of things, the three transformed sheep are to be offered as sacrifices and brought back to Cordu. It is no surprise that they did not wait until early May. The twelfth night is, in fact, the day of a grand-scale sacrifice to the concealed entity?"

Aurore's eyes scanned the surroundings, and she said, "That was my assumption, but why did the padre and his accomplices receive varying degrees of blessings before Lent? According to my understanding, it should have been an exchange through sacrifice."

Drawing on his malicious perspective, Lumian made a bold conjecture based on the previous cycle's events.

"A small sacrifice and a grand ritual? At the end of the Lent celebration, the padre, who had obtained extraordinary powers, no longer concealed his abnormality. It is evident that he was

planning something significant!"
After pondering for a moment, Aurore said, "The Lent celebration could be a part of the grand ritual. Before the grand ritual, the padre made up his mind and offered his soul to the evil deity. With a certain amount of offerings, he obtained a plethora of blessings, completely revealing his true colors. By the looks of it, everyone in Cordu will be implicated once the Lent celebration commences. No one can escape."
The siblings exchanged glances and believed that their assumption was close to the truth.
However, if the abnormality erupted entirely from the Lent celebration until the twelfth night, how could they patiently wait until the final ritual to find the key to the cycle?
There was a high probability that everyone in the village, apart from those who died as sacrifices, would be corrupted!
"I am only a Sequence 7..." Aurore covered her face and said, "And you are only a Sequence 9."
They were facing such a dire situation!
Based on Lumian's account of the battle at the end of the Lent celebration and Aurore's recent experience hunting black-marked monsters, she knew that she was no match for the padre who had received a boon. She felt that she had to prepare in advance before she could confront Pierre Berry.
Lumian had fortunately defeated the mutated padre in a one-on-two battle.
Yet, preventing the padre and his accomplices from obtaining supernatural powers in advance could avert the twelfth night. The cycle would most likely restart in advance.
"Hell difficulty! Hell difficulty!" Aurore slammed the dining table with a mournful expression.
Without waiting for Lumian's response, she raised her hands and tousled her blonde locks, as if releasing pent-up emotions.
After a series of gestures, Aurore composed herself and calmly addressed Lumian, "Seek out the trio of foreigners tomorrow morning. You may disclose the abnormality in the village to them. Concealing our status as Beyonders is unnecessary."
"It's very dangerous..." Lumian instinctively replied.
Was it not natural for wild Beyonders to be considered culpable when they encountered officials?
Aurore let out a slow exhale and stated, "In this predicament, we can't care less. Other than the enigmatic lady, the trio are likely the most reliable individuals in the village. Moreover, each of them possesses strength that is on par with mine or even surpasses it. We are all in the same boat. Do not underestimate one another.

Whether one is a wild Beyonder or an official, we must band together. As for the possibility of being hunted down by officials in the future, we shall cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, we must focus on escaping this loop."
Lumian had heard his sister use the phrase 'all in the same boat' before. He knew it implied that everyone was in a similar predicament and facing the same problem. If something were to happen, no one could escape. They had to stand together.
"Very well, I will seek them out tomorrow," he assented.
Aurore continued, "I now suspect that someone else is behind the padre and Pierre. He is the root of the corruption."
"Madame Pualis?" Lumian guessed. "Not only is she powerful, but she is also the padre's mistress. She can control him in secret and use him to influence the others in the village."
"But she has no apparent connection to Pierre." Aurore gazed at her brother, frowning in contemplation. "From the encounter with the three sheep, Pierre and Niort should have gained supernatural powers when they grazed the plains last October. At the very least, they should have acquired the corresponding knowledge. This is because they did not return midway, so it is impossible to obtain it elsewhere.
"This means that the abnormality in the village can be traced back to July and August of last year. Did you notice any anomalies?"
Lumian shook his head slowly.
"No."
He had initially thought that he was thoroughly acquainted with Cordu, but now, he realized that the undercurrents had been present for over half a year. This realization filled him with dread and made him feel like a stranger in his own home.
What is the problem? Lumian felt as though he was shrouded in layers of fog. He could never discern the truth of the matter.
Aurore continued, "It could also be that owl. Perhaps the legendary Warlock who died is not truly deceased. He may still be hiding somewhere in the village, or perhaps someone who we frequently encounter. He may have already discovered that I am a Warlock, and deliberately suppressed the legend from me. There are no such restrictions for ordinary individuals like you."
Aurore instructed in a low voice, "Notify me immediately the next time the owl pays a visit. I will get White Paper to track it and determine its whereabouts."
Lumian tersely acknowledged his sister's request, indicating that he too was waiting for the owl to appear.
This time, I will pluck all your feathers! He cursed inwardly.
Aurore pondered for a moment before issuing a third directive.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I shall extend an invitation to Madame Pualis. The administrator remains at his post, leaving the butler and the servants as the only occupants of the castle. You may clandestinely enter and scour for any clues. If you are successful in persuading the three foreigners in the morning to come, we can get their aid in this operation."
She dared not let White Paper venture to Madame Pualis's place whilst she was present. Nevertheless, she could not afford to be distracted whilst in Madame Pualis's company, thus she had to rely on her brother.
Lumian nodded before advancing the suggestion,
"I would advise against being alone with Madame Pualis. I fear she may seize the opportunity to deal with you."
"Shall we invite Nazélie and the others to an afternoon tea gathering?"
The more individuals present, the safer it would be.
"Indeed." Aurore deemed it a superior option.
She then remarked in a tone that was equal parts apprehensive and teasing, "You must exercise caution after infiltrating the castle. I do not wish to end up an aunt."
Lumian dared not retort, but gave her a glance that conveyed, "I am more concerned about your safety, for Madame Pualis will be with you."
During supper, Aurore set White Paper free to monitor the sheep pen. She discovered that the three sheep had licked the blood off their faces, preventing Shepherd Pierre Berry from detecting any anomaly.
Following that, Lumian resumed his education on mysticism until he fell asleep. He acquired mastery over many Hermes words, including "me," "name," "summon," "need," "light," and "Sun."
Light served as an incantation to activate the Integrity Brooch. There were three paragraphs in total.
.....
Lumian awoke in the room shrouded in a faint gray mist.
He strode to the window and scrutinized the dark red "peak" and the dilapidated edifices that surrounded it once more.
I wonder what secrets lie here... Lumian muttered.
As he gazed, a thought suddenly struck him.
The ruins contained too many hazardous zones that he either could not or dared not approach. For instance, the lair of the three-faced monster. However, if he could summon a spirit world creature akin to White Paper and forge a pact with it, allowing it to infiltrate and observe, he ought to be able to gather more intelligence.

His vision, sense of smell, and hearing were all heightened by his Beyonder characteristics. In theory, they constituted a kind of supernatural power that could be conveyed upon White Paper.

As he ruminated, Lumian muttered to himself, The problem now is whether I can summon a spirit world creature in the dream ruins...

If I cannot, can I utilize our connection to bring it into the dream after summoning and forging the pact in reality?

What implications will the addition of a contracted creature have on the cycle? *Can the corresponding spirit world be added to the mix?* If not, once the summoning duration elapses, the contracted creature will return and the cycle will recommence...

The more Lumian thought about it, the more his head throbbed. He felt a profound reverence for mysticism. He could only hope to swiftly master a few languages that would enable him to complete a summoning ritual.

Without further ado, he seized his shotgun, the meager quantity of lead bullets that remained, and the sharp axe. He departed his home, traversed the wilderness, and re-entered the ruins.

Chapter 58: Cherishing Talent

After two nights of reconnaissance, Lumian discovered that the monsters inhabiting the outskirts of the dream ruins were fewer in number than he'd initially believed.

Having dispatched the skinless creature, the shotgun-wielding monstrosity, and the monster with the black mark, Lumian found little else in his search of the area. All he uncovered were a few twitching chunks of flesh.

Their sole purpose seemed to be as sustenance.

Yet Lumian had long since realized that he had no need for food within the dream.

Each time he entered, he felt invigorated and hunger-free. His energy would wane only after extended bouts of exploration or combat, replaced by a sensation akin to hunger. But it was a mild feeling that didn't necessitate additional nourishment.

Once the hunger became unbearable, Lumian's spiritual reserves and stamina would be all but depleted. Physically and mentally drained, he'd be forced to exit the dream.

After consuming a meal and recovering in the real world, he would return to the dreamscape, his vigor restored and hunger vanquished.

As he delved deeper, Lumian surveyed his surroundings for any signs of collapsed structures. He discovered a smattering of coins, but their combined value amounted to little more than a Louis d'or.

He found merely a few livre bleu inscribed with words.

Left with no alternative, Lumian decided to venture further into the ruins.

He cautiously navigated through the faint gray fog and oppressive darkness, weaving between the ruins' standing and fallen walls.

Suddenly, he stumbled upon a series of shallow, bizarre footprints.

It was difficult to classify them as footprints--the left one appeared ordinary, but the right seemed more akin to a palm imprint.

Another monster? Lumian stealthily trailed the footprints, all the while scrutinizing his environment and envisioning the ideal battlefield for various scenarios.

Eventually, he detected movement, prompting him to halt. He skirted around the area and scaled a toppled building, using the scattered, hefty rubble as cover.

Peering out cautiously, Lumian surveyed the source of the noise.

There, in the center of an uncluttered wasteland, stood a figure that could scarcely be described as human.

While vaguely humanoid in shape, closer inspection revealed a

host of incongruities.
Two eyes occupied the space where a nose should have been. Above them, a mouth, and below, a pair of ears. The nose was nestled near the temples, while a leg and an arm replaced each shoulder. The lower half of the figure consisted of another leg and arm. The entire form seemed to have been haphazardly assembled from mismatched human components.
This revelation instantly clarified the nature of the peculiar tracks Lumian had been following.
The creature was garbed in a brown short-sleeved shirt and dark blue trousers, typical attire for lower-class Intisians. It paced the barren landscape, shoeless and hatless.
Lumian refrained from attacking, opting instead to observe patiently.
Before long, the monster raised an arm and contorted its body backward, its head making contact with the ground.
It's incredibly flexible... it would make a great dancer... Lumian mused sardonically.
As if on cue, the creature launched into a dance.
Its movements alternated between bold and graceful, sometimes bizarre and comical, yet always rhythmic.
More notably, the creature seemed to possess no skeletal structure--its limbs twisted and folded behind its back, and its legs and arms intertwined with ease.
As the Prankster King of Cordu Village, Lumian quickly devised a fitting moniker for his newfound quarry: Noodle Man!
Drawing on his observations, he began to formulate a strategy for the impending confrontation.
I mustn't assume that I can evade its attacks simply by maneuvering behind it. Noodle Man is capable of treating its front and back interchangeably...
I must be wary of its potential to constrict me like a serpent...
Though its vital points remain uncertain, it does have a head--I'll start by chopping off that...
As Lumian's thoughts raced, the monster's dance grew increasingly frenetic. It leaped skyward, limbs splayed as if attempting to embrace the heavens.
Lumian found himself somewhat entranced, an urge to sway his body in sync with the creature's movements taking hold.
He couldn't help but recall a melody his sister often played, the beat echoing through his mind: Dum-tch, dum-tch...
Suddenly, a warmth spread across his left pec as whispers seemed to reverberate in his skull.
His scalp prickled and body shuddered, as though the phantom

voice that had once pushed him to the brink of madness was about to speak again.
Uh... Lumian hastily undid the buttons of his leather coat and gray shirt with his left hand and gazed at his bare chest.
The inky thorn mark over his heart had returned. The bluish-black symbol, consisting of an eye and writhing worms, materialized and bore down on the former.
Lumian froze in shock as his mind raced.
I hadn't even entered Cogitation, let alone held it for a few seconds...
Did Noodle Man's dance somehow trigger this?
Is there something related to mysticism about that dance? Some hidden magic?
Luckily, when the mark activates like this, the horrific whispers are nearly mute. It won't drive me to death's door or strip me of all restraint. But I'll suffer a skull-splitting migraine, uncontrollable tremors, and disorientation...
Since becoming a Hunter, Lumian had avoided entering that Cogitation state to tap into his special trait. The danger seemed far greater now.
Before, he had flirted with death and emerged unscathed. But now, hovering at death's door might cause him to lose all self-control, with irreparable consequences!
Worse, excessive exposure to that ghastly whisper might drive him irreparably insane, even if he survived and retained control.
He dared not take that risk again unless it was a last resort.
After two or three seconds, Lumian was no longer astonished by the thorn symbol being stimulated by Noodle Man's dance. An indescribable joy welled up in his heart.
He could endure such a negative state completely!
So, is there a chance that by learning Noodle Man's dance, I can dance it ahead of time to activate... uh--partially activate the special trait of my dream when hunting powerful monsters? Then, I'll charge at the stunned target and finish it off in a few moves.
Even if I can't fully trigger my special trait by dancing, it should be useful. I don't expect the target to give up resisting like the shotgun monster. It's enough to weaken them greatly... Lumian's thoughts raced. The more he watched the dancing Noodle Man, the more he found it pleasing.
The eyes on the nose, the mouth on the forehead, and the arm that acted as a leg. How could any of that be as beautiful as the magical dance?
In the blink of an eye, Lumian felt a strong sense of cherishing such talent, allowing him to find a reason.

Aurore said that we can't select talents with a uniform standard. So, why must it be a human and not a monster?
He decided not to hunt the Noodle Man before mastering the dance. He would come and observe it a few times every night to try to master it as soon as possible.
Of course, he planned to experiment with the other party first.
He wanted to see how the incomplete special trait would affect the monster!
Lumian quickly made up his mind. He didn't button his clothes and bared his left chest. He circled around the cover and jumped from the collapsed house to the wasteland.
Noodle Man's dance abruptly halted.
It began to tremble.
It turned to Lumian, prostrated itself, and lay on the ground.
Lumian stopped and didn't approach further, maintaining a safe distance.
Noodle Man didn't move.
Lumian nodded imperceptibly and muttered to himself, "Even when facing my 'special' trait that hasn't been fully activated, such a low-level monster will give up resisting and express its submission... I wonder what will happen to those at a higher level or those with Beyonder characteristics... What I can be sure of is that the effect won't be as good..."
Lumian looked at Noodle Man and smiled.
"Come on, dance again."
Noodle Man didn't dare look up. It was unknown if it understood what Lumian was saying.
Seeing that his sincere words were ineffective, Lumian emphasized, "Quick, dance for your pépé again!"
Noodle Man's body trembled as it continued to prostrate.
How can I communicate with it if monsters can't understand human language? Lumian felt a little helpless.
He immediately put his newly acquired Hermes vocabulary to use and said, "I. Need..."
Lumian didn't say another word and began a dance with his body movements.
The monster didn't even acknowledge him as it pressed its face against the soil of the wasteland.
"Are you an imbecile?" Lumian couldn't help but curse.
He felt his scolding was unjustified. After all, which monster he had encountered was not stupid?
Even the most intelligent shotgun monster was subdued by human intelligence!
At that moment, Lumian felt the warmth in his chest dissipate.

He instinctively lowered his head and noticed the thorn symbol and the bluish-black symbol vanish simultaneously.
Lumian quickly shifted his gaze towards Noodle Man.
Noodle Man happened to raise its head and looked at Lumian with its nose-located eyes.
The man and monster stared at each other, stunned for a second.
Thud, thud, thud. Lumian turned around and ran away.
Noodle Man leaped up and chased him ferociously.
Lumian was well acquainted with the area. His running speed was faster than the uncoordinated monster, so he easily shook it off and circled back to the wasteland to hide in his original location.
He didn't flee because he was afraid of the other party, but he was concerned that he might not be able to control himself if they really fought. He didn't know if he could find another dancing Noodle Man in the dream ruins.
Before learning that mysterious dance, he had no intention of hunting this strange monster.
After waiting for a while, Lumian saw Noodle Man return to the area.
He nodded and muttered to himself, As expected, monsters have their own territory. They are accustomed to moving around or patrolling a certain route... This is very similar to wild beasts...
Next, Lumian patiently waited for the dance that might not happen.
After nearly two hours, he had expended quite a bit of his spirituality and felt a little hungry.
Noodle Man, who had rested for a long time, walked to the center of the wasteland and raised its arm and leg.

Chapter 59: Again

Noodle Man danced once more, and Lumian confirmed that the mysterious dance could prevent the black thorn symbol on his chest from activating fully. It produced no terrifying sound, only an illusory whisper.

This was highly advantageous for Lumian's "special" trait in the dreamscape.

However, he discovered two problems:

Firstly, Noodle Man's dance moves were extremely difficult and violated the human body's structure. Only a monster with exaggerated flexibility like Noodle Man could complete them. Although Lumian was a Beyonder and a Hunter with a greatly enhanced body, he had no confidence in replicating them himself. He feared that dancing even once would result in ligament tears, muscle strains or worse, fractures.

Secondly, the dance stirred the surrounding powers of nature and depleted Lumian's spirituality considerably.

After watching it for the third time, Lumian sighed silently, realizing he needed rest. I have to go back and rest after watching this.

A Hunter's spirituality is really useless!

He was almost certain that the hidden existence corresponding to the thorn symbol was closely related to this dream ruin.

The padre had a black mark on his body, and there was a dancing monster that could activate the thorn symbol. It would be surprising to say that it had nothing to do with the hidden existence!

Lumian believed Aurore's guess even more, thinking of the similar symbol on the padre's chest and the dream ruins rebooting along with reality.

The key to resolving the loop might be hidden in the depths of this place, playing a vital role.

Is that why the mysterious lady kept hinting at me to unravel the secret of the dream ruins? The more Lumian thought about it, the more frustrated he became. He raised his left hand, which wasn't holding an axe, and made obscene gestures at the black thorn symbol on his chest.

Ignoring the question of whether the hidden existence could sense or see him, Lumian felt that the problem wouldn't deteriorate any further, given that he had already fallen into a time loop thanks to Him, and the people around him were becoming stranger and more dangerous.

After watching the dance for the third time, Lumian rubbed his

somewhat empty head and left the ruins to return to his home on the other side of the wilderness, enduring the slight warmth in his chest.
Before leaving the dream, he attempted to consolidate the dance movements he had memorized and almost sprained his back, broke his knee ligaments and tore his calf muscles.
"Dogsh*t, this isn't something an ordinary human can do!" Lumian cursed and lay on the bed.
As his spirituality was greatly drained, he quickly fell asleep.
.....
As Lumian awoke, the sky was just beginning to lighten. The sun had yet to rise, and the crimson moon had lost its luster.
He sat up slowly, feeling the satisfaction of a deep sleep. His exhausted spirituality had been perfectly replenished.
Walking to the window, Lumian drew back the curtains, allowing the light of dawn to flood the room.
In the next moment, his eyes were fixed on the figure larger than an ordinary owl, perched on an elm tree not far away, staring down at him.
Lumian quickly snapped out of his daze and opened his mouth.
"Aurore! Aurore!"
The suspect is here!
Quick, follow it!
Upon hearing the shout, the owl unfurled its wings and soared towards the edge of the village.
It gradually descended and vanished into the forest bordering Cordu Village.
Aurore, dressed in a white silk nightgown, entered Lumian's bedroom seconds later, her face contorted in irritation.
"Is it that owl again?"
Lumian gazed out of the window and replied, "Yes. Did White Paper manage to follow it?"
Aurore pulled at her long blonde tresses and spat, "Why does it always appear at such ungodly hours? I was sound asleep when you woke me up. By the time I could release White Paper, it had flown away."
Lumian shot back, "But you said you couldn't sleep well with something on your mind."
Aurore rolled her eyes at him and sneered, "Humans tend to feel nervous, uneasy, and fearful at the beginning. Once they get used to it, they become numb to it. Only by sleeping well can they remain alert and rational. If you don't sleep well, it will affect your mental state and signs of losing control will surface."
Lumian's expression was remorseful as he said, "We can only wait

for the next time."
After a moment of contemplation, Aurore suggested, "Let's try to identify a pattern in its appearances. We can't keep waiting around all the time. We need to rest and cannot be on guard constantly."
Lumian reminisced about the first few sightings.
"It's always in the latter half of the night and early morning hours..."
"Why only during that period?" Aurore inquired further. "It seems more like an act than a pattern. Think carefully. Did you do anything or repeat the same actions on the corresponding nights when it appeared in the first half of the night?"
"I was exploring the dream ruins," Lumian admitted to his sister as he began to recall. "Before it first appeared, I killed the first monster in the dream. Before it appeared the second time, I activated the symbol on my chest through Cogitation and discovered what was special about me. The third time, I consumed the potion in the dream and became a Hunter. The fourth time, which is today, I discovered a way to activate my specialness in the dream to a certain extent while incurring less damage."
"How did you do it?" Aurore asked eagerly.
Lumian recounted Noodle Man's dance and his attempt.
As Aurore listened, she thought about the owl. After her brother finished speaking, she deliberated and said, "The owl's visits seem to be related to significant progress in your exploration of the dream."
Uh... Lumian thought for a moment before his eyes lit up.
"Indeed!
"The first time I killed a monster, the first time I displayed my specialness, the first time I consumed a potion and stepped onto the Beyonder path, the first time I found a way to make use of that specialness...
"Similar major developments also have a certain reaction in reality. That owl sensed it and came over to observe? Heh, it smelled something."
Aurore tersely acknowledged.
"In the future, we can deliberately create a similar opportunity to see if we can wait for that owl."
"I believe the next time it appears is after I master the mysterious dance and can truly use the specialness brought about by the symbol on my chest in my dream," Lumian pondered, revealing a malicious smile. "When the time comes, I'll inform you before entering the dream. Be prepared."
Aurore thought for a moment and nodded.

"I hope to figure out who the owl is related to and what role it plays in Cordu's abnormality."
Lumian seized the opportunity to inquire, "Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, do you possess any knowledge about that particular dance? As you are aware, my understanding of mysticism is still rudimentary."
Aurore dragged a chair in front of Lumian's wooden table and settled in. After pondering for a moment, she responded, "Several notebooks have alluded to the existence of large-scale ritualistic magic during the early Fifth Epoch and throughout the Fourth Epoch."
"Those rituals entailed not only numerous sacrifices but also a multitude of participants. They employed specific dances to appease their desired entities in exchange for a response."
"In essence, it was a form of sacrificial ritual and magic. Dancing, from the outset, was believed to influence nature and facilitate communication with deities. Its effects resemble those of Beyonder language and the combination of herbs, essential oils, and other ingredients."
In Aurore and Lumian's world, history was divided into five epochs. The First Epoch was the Chaos Epoch, followed by the Dark Epoch, and then the Cataclysm Epoch. However, Aurore had heard from a pen pal that the Cataclysm Epoch was also known as the Glorious Epoch.
The Fourth Epoch was the Age of the Gods, or the Epoch of the Gods. The Fifth Epoch was the present day, which began 1,358 years ago and was referred to as the Iron Age.
Of the five epochs, the history of the first three remained unverifiable, with only myths and legends surviving. The Fourth Epoch occasionally yielded documents, information, notebooks, ruins, mausoleums, ancient cities, and so on. Nevertheless, history seemed shrouded in a thick fog, with only a faint outline discernible. The theological texts of the seven Churches often recounted stories from the Fourth Epoch, which served as the only source of illumination.
After listening to his sister's explanation, Lumian hazarded a guess.
"That Noodle Man employs dance to appease the hidden entity that corresponds to the thorn symbol. Is it hoping to elicit a response or a boon?
"Perhaps a significant portion of its ritual is absent, resulting in an extremely weak effect. Or is the problem with the dream ruins causing a failure that can only trigger a tiny fraction of the power contained in the symbol within my body?"

"Heh heh, it's as if I'm a god. Having witnessed Noodle Man's dance and being pleased by it, I decided to highlight the symbol and offer a certain response."
However, Lumian had no control over this. It was an automatic reaction of the thorn symbol.
Aurore smiled and replied, "You are more like a carrier of that symbol, a tool, in a sense."
She paused thoughtfully and said, "I suspect that the dance was specifically invented to please or communicate with the hidden entity that corresponds to the thorn symbol. Otherwise, it wouldn't have elicited a reaction from the symbol...
"Furthermore, based on your description, this is not something an ordinary person can accomplish. Only Beyonders with special enhancements can do so.
"Although I am familiar with the names of the corresponding Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 pathways, I have a certain level of understanding of them. None of them can execute that kind of dance, and Noodle Man's performance does not seem like that of a higher Sequence. Otherwise, you would not have been able to escape."
"Perhaps it is not from the 22 pathways, but rather a boon from a hidden entity?" Lumian recalled the mysterious lady's words.
Aurore looked out the window and pursed her lips.
"I wonder if this has anything to do with the Circle Inhabitant or a power equivalent to Sequence 9 or Sequence 8?"
"Probably." Lumian suddenly laughed. "Let me name it. Noodle Man, Circle Inhabitant's corresponding Sequence 9!"
Aurore couldn't help but look up at the ceiling.
The siblings chatted for a while before heading downstairs for breakfast.
After studying Hermes until past ten, Lumian departed with important items.

Chapter 60: "Dancer"

Lumian was in no rush to track down Ryan, Leah, and Valentine. Instead, he headed straight for the Ol' Tavern, hoping to get lucky.

If that enigmatic woman showed up, he had a slew of questions for her!

Accepting her gift had bound him to some future cost. He might as well seize the chance to gain more benefits, as Aurore had advised.

The instant Lumian stepped into the Ol' Tavern, his eyes sparkled.

The mysterious woman sat in her usual corner seat, two glasses of emerald absinthe before her.

Two glasses? She knew I'd come? Lumian approached her with a smile and greeted her.

"Good morning."

She wore a white blouse with vine-leaf patterns at the collar and a beige ankle-length dress, a light-red beret beside her.

Lumian, no stranger to his sister's fashion magazines, recognized this as Trier's latest trend.

She glanced up at him.

"It's getting late. Almost noon."

This is to fit your schedule, isn't it? Lumian thought, annoyed.

But seeing the enigmatic woman brought him a strange sense of calm.

He sat and cut to the chase.

"I've been through a lot lately."

She slid a glass of absinthe his way. The swirling green liquid was like a beacon of joy.

She neither invited him to speak nor silenced him.

Lumian sipped the absinthe, finding it rich and invigorating, with a subtle bitter note. It tasted different from any absinthe he'd had before.

"What's this?" he asked, puzzled.

"Another kind of absinthe—quite popular in Trier these days. To differentiate it from the original, people call it absinthe fennel. Authors, painters, and poets are particularly fond of it." She took a small sip.

The green liquid in the clear glass seemed to possess a hypnotic hue.

Absinthe's main ingredients were wormwood, fennel, and anise. Different producers used slightly varied recipes, some even adding lemon essential oils.

Lumian didn't understand her motives. Had she traveled to Trier just to bring back absinthe fennel?

He didn't ask. Instead, he recounted recent events, both real and

dreamed.
She sipped from her small cup of absinthe fennel, listening quietly to Lumian's account.
"That's about it. Can I learn that mysterious dance as quickly as possible?" he asked, bluntly.
He didn't bother inquiring about the loop's key or the dream's secret. Experience told him he wouldn't get a straight answer.
The woman swirled her emerald liquid and smiled.
"Without a significant boost in flexibility, you'll never master it.
"You could force yourself through a portion, but you'd risk ligament and muscle tears. How would you hunt monsters then?"
Lumian was attuned to the subtext in others' words.
"Is there a way to greatly increase my flexibility?"
She chuckled. "That's for you to figure out."
"..." Lumian was stumped by her cryptic hint.
If she were a less mysterious acquaintance, he'd demand, "Explain yourself! Don't make me kneel and beg!"
As if reading his mind, she smiled and added, "The solution to your flexibility lies within you."
"Huh?" Lumian looked perplexed.
She sipped her absinthe fennel and sighed.
"Didn't your sister teach you ritualistic magic?"
Lumian noticed the strange emotion flicker in her eyes once again.
"She did." His heart quickened. "Pray to myself?"
She assessed him and laughed.
"Who do you think you are? What good would praying to you do?
"You can only summon the weakest creatures from the spirit world. Your spiritual perception improves with your body."
Danger intuition, for example? Lumian grasped the gist of her words.
Though Hunters' spirituality was enhanced, it focused on spiritual perception and fell short in ritualistic magic and other mystical matters.
"So, what do I need to do?" Lumian pressed.
The lady sighed wearily. "You've studied dualistic ritual law, haven't you?"
"Yes." Lumian nodded.
The lady sighed again. "Luckily you have a sister. Otherwise, I'd have to teach you all this mystic mumbo jumbo. Too tiresome."
You mean you didn't tell me about ritual magic, Cogitation, Spirit Vision, contracted creatures, or magic languages because it was too much hassle? You just showed up after Aurore finished teaching me? Lumian felt rage bubbling up inside him.
He took a couple of deep breaths and said, "Dualistic rituals require

items closely tied to deities or supernatural beings, but I don't have any..."
His voice trailed off as a thought struck him.
The woman smirked and said, "Oh yes, you do.
"Don't you remember?"
Lumian jabbed a finger at his chest.
"The thorn symbol and the bluish-black symbol?"
The lady nodded before reminding, "Forget the bluish-black symbol. The key to a dualistic ritual is channeling the divine power in the object. If its power decreases, the balance in your body will be disrupted. And when that happens..."
She left the sentence hanging but her expression told Lumian all he needed to know.
In Aurore's usual grim words: "No hope. Just wait for death!"
"Is the bluish-black symbol protecting me from corruption?" Lumian knew enough about the mysticism to recognize his current state as corruption.
"It's the great existence I mentioned protecting you," the woman said solemnly. "Once you solve the secret of the dream ruins, I'll tell you His honorific name. You can pray to Him directly."
Did this great existence seal the corruption symbolized by the thorn in my heart, preventing it from corrupting me completely? Lumian didn't know if this great existence was good or evil, or had sinister intentions, but he felt an odd affinity with Him on this.
He thought for a moment and guessed, "Use a dualistic ritual to steal the power of the thorn symbol?
"If its power decreases, the corruption will weaken and the seal strengthen?"
"How can you call it stealing?" the lady retorted. "This is appealing to an entity for a boon. It just so happens He has some of His power nearby. The response follows the law of proximity. Thanks to the seal from the great existence and barriers attenuating it, the entity's true form won't sense it."
Only mystics like you who speak in riddles understand how to sugarcoat it... What's the difference between this and stealing? Lumian thought sourly.
From the lady's explanation of divine boon and abnormal pathways, he asked shrewdly,
"Through the dualistic ritual, can I appeal to the power behind the thorn symbol and ask it to grant me the ability to greatly increase my flexibility?"
"Something like that," the lady said. "To be precise, ask it to grant you the power of Dancer."
"Dancer?" Lumian thought of Noodle Man's performance.

The lady took a sip of absinthe and said, "For Beyonder pathways beyond the standard 22, we classify them into Sequence 9 to Sequence 0 for convenience.
"In a way, this Sequence division follows the rules of this world.
"Does Dancer correspond to Sequence 9 of the thorn symbol, just as Circle Inhabitant corresponds to its Sequence 4?" Lumian fired off. "Can it boost my flexibility and improve my mystic skills, allowing me to easily grasp that mysterious dance?"
The lady smiled in relief. "As expected, with a foundation in mysticism, communication is much easier. No need for me to explain further."
Lumian asked eagerly, "Then what are Sequences 8, 7, 6 and 5 of the thorn symbol?"
"Sequence 8 is Alms Monk, and Sequence 7 is Contractee. Gosh, why do you want to know so much? Master the ritual first and strive to become a Dancer as soon as possible." The woman was losing patience.
Alms Monk... Contractee... These names instantly clicked for Lumian.
Alms Monk referred to certain members of the various churches in reality.
The Eternal Blazing Sun Church was rife with factions, each with their own beliefs. Two main groups stood out; the Order of Preachers and the Brotherhood Minor, also known as the Alms Monk Brotherhood.
The former was made up of clergymen and the Purifiers of the Inquisition who were dedicated to the cruel persecution and purification of heretics, cultists, and wild Beyonders, all in the name of promoting the orthodox teachings of the Eternal Blazing Sun.
The latter, however, were mainly concentrated in the cloisters, with a few clergymen among their ranks. They espoused temperance, begging for food and ascetic training, preaching in various poor places, all with the aim of spreading the faith of the Eternal Blazing Sun.
At the mention of the Alms Monk, Lumian immediately thought of missionaries, asceticism, and special ritualistic magic.
As for Contractee, the first thing that came to mind was the black mark on the padre and the mouth orifice monster.
Aurore explained that it might be a mark left behind by a special contract.
"Wait, the monster I killed was a Contractee?" Lumian asked in surprise.
I actually killed a monster equivalent to a Sequence 7?

The lady nodded slightly and said, "Yes, Contractees use special contracts and godhood provided by that existence as witnesses to obtain different powers from various creatures. One contract corresponds to one ability.

"Whether they're powerful or not depends on the abilities they obtain and how many they have. It's not impossible for ordinary people to kill them if they take the wrong path.

"In fact, similar situations occur in the Beyonder domain. It's common for Beyonders who aren't skilled in combat to be killed by those of an inferior Sequence.

"Ability is important, as is intelligence. Preparation in advance is equally significant."

Chapter 61: Description

The more Lumian listened to the lady in front of him, the more he concurred.

He was uncertain about what would happen at a higher Sequence. Among the few Beyonder creatures he had interacted with, the threat posed by the fellow with the vortex-shaped proboscis was far inferior to the monster carrying a shotgun.

Although he had become a Beyonder, significantly improving his close combat ability and exploitation of the environment, the problem primarily lay with the Contractee monster.

Firstly, it did not display a relatively strong pursuit ability. Secondly, it lacked long-range attacks. Thirdly, its invisibility ability was not ridiculous. It was completely countered by a Hunter's grasp of the surrounding environment and minute traces. Moreover, it had the common problem of monsters. It did not have high intelligence and was not as combat-intelligent as the shotgun monster. It had easily stepped into the enemy's trap.

With all of this combined, the final outcome was obvious. Lumian just never expected it to be equivalent to a Sequence 7.

He didn't even compare it to the shotgun monster, recognizing the vast difference between the two. The shotgun monster was a force to be reckoned with, while the mouth orifice monster was weak.

Ability, intelligence, preparation, improvisation, environmental factors... There are too many variables that can affect the outcome of a battle... Lumian concluded inwardly and asked without much hope, "Can I directly pray for Contractee powers?"

The lady chuckled. "That's a good way to kill yourself."

She casually explained, "In theory, it's possible. After all, the power sealed in your body isn't limited to the Sequence 7 equivalent. But can your body withstand such a tremendous boon or rather, corruption? If you don't mind turning into a monster, a puppet of that existence, or transforming into another creature, then go ahead. Tsk, then it won't be long before I see you personally turning your sister into a sacrifice."

Lumian's hair stood on end from the woman's words, and a chill ran down his spine, realizing that he wasn't ready to advance beyond his current level.

He cautiously asked, "So, the most significant boon I can handle right now is a Dancer?"

"Yes, that's why I waited for you to become a Beyonder and digest some of it before telling you about it," the woman explained, taking another sip of her green liquid. "Only when your mind, spirituality, and body have improved significantly will you have a

chance of resisting the corruption attached to the boon. Then, you can slowly control the power.
"As your Soul Body and Body of Heart and Mind strengthen, and your body adapts to the slight changes brought about by the power of the boon, you can consider Alms Monk."
For Lumian, the most crucial thing was to learn the mysterious dance. Initiating the incomplete activation of the thorn symbol would significantly improve his ability to explore the dream ruins. Therefore, he nodded slightly, no longer thinking about Alms Monk and Contractee.
"How should I pray?"
He had already learned the duality ritual, but he still didn't know the target's honorific name, domain, and corresponding ingredients.
"Ahem," the lady coughed.
Then, she spoke solemnly, "What I'm about to say shall leave my mouth and enter your ears... You must not tell anyone, or you'll harm them."
Leave my mouth and enter your ears... This is a sentence Aurore likes to write... Has this lady read one of her novels? Lumian thought.
"I understand."
He thought for a moment and asked, "Will anything go wrong from hearing it?"
The lady took a sip of absinthe fennel and smiled.
"When did you have the illusion that there's nothing wrong with you?"
Lumian was stunned for a moment before looking down at his left pec.
The lady scoffed.
"You belong to the group of individuals who are on the brink of being corrupted. Luckily, the mark left by that great existence was activated, and the corresponding power descended upon you, sealing the source of corruption and establishing balance.
"Next, you will perform a ritual to confront the power within the seal and pray for the corresponding blessings. It is akin to proactively withstanding a certain level of corruption.
"So, why should you be afraid of minor issues that you hear?"
The more I hear, the more I feel that there's a huge problem... Lumian wasn't too confident.
The lady shook her head and smiled.
"Do not fret. When I reveal the corresponding words, I will provide you with a sufficiently concealed environment and secure protection. In the future, it would be best to perform the ritual in

the ruins, where there is gray fog and the protection of the great existence. It will not directly draw the attention of that entity.
"Furthermore, before the ritual, scramble every segment and description. Attempt not to piece them together and analyze them in a complete manner. Otherwise, heh..."
She chuckled and did not elaborate on the outcome, but Lumian could imagine what would occur.
Observing that he did not inquire further, the woman nodded slightly.
"Let us commence.
"The first part is the Power of Inevitability.
"Using it is sufficient. It corresponds with your black thorn symbol. The complete name of that being is not something you can comprehend at the moment. Even I must provide some concealment before daring to contemplate it."
For some reason, Lumian felt the light around him diminish slightly, but he was unsure.
At that moment, the woman controlled her expression and said solemnly, "The second part is:
"You are the past, the present, and the future.
"You are the reason, the result, and the process..."
As the lady enunciated each word with precision, Lumian felt his senses spin. He realized that a vortex of dark wind was enveloping him.
The table, on which his absinthe fennel rested, writhed as if imbued with a life force of its own.
Suddenly, a sharp sound echoed.
An ebony worm, as long as an adult's index finger, slithered out of the wooden board, and an ominous aura spread instantaneously.
Before Lumian could observe the worm's features, the woman sitting across from him lowered her cup filled with the green liquid and slammed it onto the grotesque creature, reducing it to a pulpy mess.
Next, the woman produced a patterned napkin, wiped the glass's base clean, and wrapped the worm's remains in it.
She took another sip of the absinthe fennel, as if nothing untoward had occurred, and emphasized, "Remember, the first and second parts must be recited in ancient Hermes. Jotun, Dragonese, and Elvish are acceptable as well."
Similar to how the initial "I" in the rite that worships oneself cannot be in Hermes... Lumian nodded to indicate his comprehension.
Although he had always been audacious, he felt slightly discomfited and uneasy when confronted with the strange

phenomena that kept manifesting during their conversation. His heart raced, but the enigmatic woman acted as if she had merely detected some impurities in their meal. She continued,
"The third part can be spoken in Hermes. The text is as follows:
"I implore you,
"I beseech your benediction.
"I plead with you to grant me the power of Dancer.
"Remember, the three sentences are progressive."
These words did not elicit a new environmental shift. The anomalies that had caused Lumian's unease and trepidation gradually subsided.
Lumian committed them to memory earnestly and followed the woman's instructions to scramble the words, to prevent any potential issues.
The woman savored the remaining absinthe fennel with satisfaction.
"The rest of the ritual is similar to common ritualistic magic."
"The corresponding ingredients are gray amber, tulips, cloves, and deer musk. Choose any two to make candles. The remaining two can be used as herbs, essential oil, and extract during the ritual."
Lumian furrowed his brow as he recalled the dualistic ritual he had learned.
"The spot representing the deity should have an item that's closely related to the deity, but my thorn symbol is on my chest. I can't skin it, right? Besides, I doubt it's useful even if I skin it."
The power was sealed in his heart and Spirit Body.
The woman nodded slightly.
"Didn't I tell you to make candles?
"When making the candle, take 5 milliliters of blood from your chest. It doesn't matter if it's more or less. In any case, fuse it into the material and let it become a part of the candle.
"In the ritual, the candle is placed in the deity's location. There's only one candle.
"Because of your blood, the candle is 'awakened' by ancient Hermes. After becoming a symbol, it will point directly at you. Then, with the subsequent description, it will activate the power sealed in you to a certain extent."
It feels like a special variant of the dualistic ritual. Aurore didn't mention that it could be done like this, so not many people know about it... Lumian thought for a moment and asked, "Can I use perfume with gray amber?"
He remembered that his sister had it, and she liked to call gray amber 'ambergris.'
The woman nodded. "Sure, use it like an essential oil."

I possess the gray amber in that case. I have some cloves at home...
Lumian pondered where he could acquire tulips and deer musk.
After much contemplation, he could only come up with three possibilities:
Firstly, Aurore, being a Warlock, might have already prepared the required materials. Secondly, the materials could be found at the administrator's residence. Thirdly, the padre's house could be a potential source.
Lumian decided to inform his sister about the ritual and break down the instructions into individual words. He planned to learn the corresponding ancient Hermes and Hermes words from her and inquire about the availability of the materials.
If she didn't have them, he would explore other options.
As the lady was about to depart, Lumian hastily questioned, "What was that lizard that crawled out of the deputy padre's mouth?"
The lady smiled and replied, "I cannot explain it to you."
Lumian struggled to maintain his composure and thought, Why not just say you don't want to tell me...
After the lady left, Lumian retrieved the pen and paper he had brought and jotted down the ritual instructions in a disordered manner. He then numbered them in the correct sequence.
...
Upon leaving Ol' Tavern, Lumian scoured the village for the trio of foreigners.
It didn't take long before he heard a faint tinkling sound.
Lumian's lips curved into a smile as he quickened his pace. As expected, Leah wore two bells on her veil and boots, Ryan donned a dark bowler hat, and Valentine had sprinkled powder on his head.
Lumian had an urge to open his arms and exclaim, "My cabbages, I missed you so much!" but he quickly remembered that he had not interacted with the foreigners in this cycle.
He kneaded his face to appear more serious and strode towards Ryan and the others.
As he brushed past them, he lowered his voice and said, "I know who you're searching for."
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine gaped at him in astonishment.
Lumian didn't pause; he continued walking forward.
The three foreigners exchanged glances, suppressed their peculiar expressions, and followed behind Lumian as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 62: Date

Lumian halted at the forest's edge, a short distance from his house, and glanced back at Leah and the others.

This spot was quite secluded, with no villagers passing through. The forest was thinly populated, making it easy to spot anyone hiding nearby.

As the tinkling sounds drew nearer, Leah asked with a smile, "How do you know we're looking for someone?"

Lumian remained silent. He pulled out the essential item he had brought with him.

The livre bleu from home!

He lifted the item and showed Ryan and the others the pages where some words had been cut out.

Without hesitation, Ryan nodded and said, "So you wrote the letter for help."

They had never mentioned a help letter in Cordu, let alone detailed that the letter was assembled from words cut from a livre bleu.

Unless the other party had a key informant in Bigorre, it had to be the letter writer.

Leah instinctively looked around.

The two small silver bells hanging from the veil above her head oddly didn't make a sound.

Valentine was about to ask what was weird about the people around him when Ryan asked, puzzled, "How can you be sure that we're here because of that letter?"

You told me yourself... Lumian smiled.

"There are very few foreigners who come to Cordu to begin with. Even fewer who don't buy wool, cheese, and lambs and only wander around the village to chat with people.

"Besides, I didn't say anything. I just showed you this livre bleu."

Realization hit Leah, and she laughed.

"So it's just a test."

"That's a brilliant idea. Those who don't know the letter won't understand your intentions, so they won't be too suspicious. At most, they'll think it's a prank, and you're the Prankster King of Cordu." Ryan nodded slightly.

This seemingly innocent line revealed that the trio had gleaned something from chatting in Cordu over the past few days. At the very least, they had identified the more prominent villagers and taken appropriate measures.

Lumian immediately flashed a teasing smile.

"You believed it? You seriously believed it?"

Seeing Ryan and the others' astonishment, he added, "I was just

joking. I'll tell you the real reason later."
Leah gritted her teeth.
"As expected of the Prankster King of Cordu. Aren't you afraid that we won't believe what you're about to say?"
"You can choose not to believe it." Lumian wore an indifferent expression. "Or you can verify it yourself."
Valentine, visibly dissatisfied, asked anxiously, "In your letter, you mentioned that the people around you are getting weirder. What's so weird about them?"
Lumian exclaimed and cracked his knuckles.
"There's plenty. To be precise, the padre believing in an evil god, Shepherd Pierre Berry turning people into sheep and herding them back to Cordu. Madame Pualis rides a demon-drawn carriage through the wilderness. When the deputy padre sleeps, a translucent lizard-like creature crawls out of his mouth. Naroka is clearly not dead, but she wants to go to Paramita. Louis Lund, the administrator's male butler, has just given birth to a baby. The owl from the Warlock legends flies back to the village from time to time..."
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine grew increasingly shocked as they listened. They didn't want to believe it, but they felt that the kid before them couldn't invent so many absurd stories.
They were all seasoned official investigators who had dealt with numerous Beyonder incidents, many involving evil gods and mystic arts. However, none were as ludicrous or exaggerated as what they were hearing now. Only the padre believing in evil gods sounded normal.
More importantly, most of the incidents they had previously handled stood independently. At most, two or three would occur simultaneously. Moreover, they were closely related to each other, but Cordu had too many horrifying abnormalities!
What kind of place is this? Almost instantly, similar thoughts raced through Leah, Ryan, and Valentine's minds.
They suspected they had inadvertently entered the legendary Abyss or Hell!
When Lumian stopped, Leah couldn't help but ask, "You're not joking, are you?"
Was there anyone normal in this village?
Lumian smiled.
"I haven't finished speaking. There's another abnormality.
"This is the third or fourth time I've talked to you about something like this. Ryan, Leah, Valentine, my cabbages."
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine weren't surprised that Lumian knew their names. It was inevitable when they had been chatting in the

village.
They were even more astonished and puzzled by the first half of the sentence.
"What do you mean?" Valentine asked with a frown.
"What I mean is that we've been repeatedly experiencing the past few days. In other words, we've fallen into a time loop." Lumian didn't let the three foreigners guess and provided a standard answer.
Without waiting for Ryan and the others to question him, he briefly mentioned what they had experienced together and finally said, "Think back carefully. Was it really March 29th when you entered the village?"
Leah and the others racked their brains.
After more than ten seconds, Valentine revealed a pained expression.
"My sense of time is hazy. I can't remember the exact date of the previous two months... But I remember. I remember celebrating my youngest son's birthday before I set off. His birthday is..."
Valentine raised his head and blurted out in shock, "April 10th!"
In other words, the actual date now is mid-to-late April? Judging from the looks of it, the number of cycles I went through before I had my memories wiped can't be more than a couple. It can't even be more than once... Yes, that was the first cycle. The loop hadn't even begun, so I could send a letter without the river's help. When the loop happened and time rewound, the corresponding memories would be replaced, but material objects beyond the range wouldn't be able to turn back? Lumian had a new theory about the letter.
He nodded imperceptibly and said to Ryan and Leah, "You can also wire the outside world and get the current date in a way that won't raise any red flags.
"When the time comes, you'll believe me."
"Yes, yes! Send a telegram!" Valentine snapped out of his stupor. "Ask the higher-ups for help!"
Lumian looked at him as if he were a fool.
"Ask for help?
"In the face of such a bizarre time loop, what do you officials usually do?"
Ryan fell silent for a moment before saying, "Stamp it out directly to prevent the corruption from spreading."
"Therefore, asking for help now is as good as suicide." Lumian smiled and shrugged.
Valentine replied fervently, "According to the rules, we have to report back ASAP. I'm willing to sacrifice myself for this!"

"..." Lumian was stunned.
Such people exist?
No, I have to get rid of this guy immediately, or everyone will die together!
Fortunately, Leah and Ryan clearly felt that they could still be saved. They exchanged a glance and nodded.
Ryan patted Valentine's shoulder and said, "Stay calm. We still don't know what's going on. Perhaps there's a better solution.
"If we really can't save ourselves, we'll report it to the higher-ups."
"That's right," Lumian hurriedly added. He recounted the discoveries and speculations minus the symbol on his chest, the dream ruins, the mysterious lady, and the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Finally, he said, "The key to the problem most likely happens on the twelfth night. We have to survive until then. Only then can we truly resolve the issue in the next cycle."
Seeing that he had revealed so many details and that they could verify them all, Ryan and the others were completely inclined to believe him. Valentine calmed down and remembered his wife and children.
Leah exhaled. "No wonder you know us and know we're looking for someone."
It turned out that they had communicated in a previous cycle.
She subconsciously touched the silver bell above her head, wanting to do a divination, but she held back when she recalled the abnormalities Lumian had described.
She didn't want to blow up because of a divination that shouldn't be done before the real investigation began.
Ryan thought for a moment and said to Lumian, "You're telling us this because you want us to cooperate with you and your sister?"
"Very astute, my cabbage." Lumian laughed and said seriously, "First, wire the outside world, saying that your investigation has made some progress. The padre seems to have a certain issue. Then, ask what the lizard-like thing that crawls out of a mouth is. This is the least likely to cause a destructive blowout of all the abnormalities. Ah, right, confirm the real date and be careful in how it's done. Don't let anyone outside suspect anything.
"Secondly, my sister will invite Madame Pualis to my house for afternoon tea this afternoon. I hope that you can sneak into the administrator's mansion with me and do a search.
"As for the future, it depends on the information we obtain today."
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine looked at each other and felt that Lumian's request wasn't too unreasonable.
This was what they would have done.
The four of them arrived at the village square. Ryan went to wire

the outside world while Leah, Valentine, and Lumian waited under the elm tree outside.
After calming down, Leah glanced at Lumian and asked curiously, "You're a Beyonder, and so is your sister?"
"Yes." Lumian didn't hide it.
Leah laughed. "Aren't you afraid of being arrested by us?"
"We're in the same boat now. In the face of an emergency where the boat is about to sink, we can only help each other." Lumian shrugged. "As for the future, we'll talk about it later. It's still unknown if we can escape this loop."
"That's true." Leah turned her head and looked at Valentine.
The reason why she brought up this topic was to let her companion understand this and not do anything stupid.
Valentine's expression remained cold as he nodded imperceptibly.
Leah then asked about something she was more concerned about.
"Why can you keep the memories from before?"
"I'm not telling you." Lumian laughed.
Without waiting for Leah's response, he spread his hands and said, "I'm just joking. Actually, I'm not sure either. I somehow retained my memories, and it's only from the last two cycles."
"Think back to what happened back then. Perhaps this is very important," Leah said after some thought.
Lumian said sincerely, "I've been thinking, but I haven't figured out anything. Perhaps I'll only suddenly realize when I encounter something."
Leah was about to help analyze the situation when Ryan, who had received a reply, walked out of the administration building.

Chapter 63: Shocking News

Leah and Valentine asked Ryan in unison, "How is it?"

Although they had already believed Lumian's words, it was inevitable for people to hope for luck. They still held onto the hope that perhaps the problem wasn't that serious because the kid wasn't knowledgeable enough to exaggerate.

Ryan looked around and saw that there was no one else around the elm tree. He spoke in a low voice, "I was afraid to ask too directly. I only know that the real date is already late April. I don't know the exact date."

Leah and Valentine fell silent.

They had indeed fallen into a strange time loop!

Judging from the various files and information, this was definitely not something the three of them should face or deal with.

They were seasoned Beyonders who had handled many Beyonder incidents. It was the first time they had encountered such a serious and abnormal situation.

Leah couldn't help but turn to look at Lumian. "What kind of place is Cordu?"

There were abnormalities everywhere, each more exaggerated than the last!

"I don't know either." Lumian had an "innocent" expression. "Before the loop, this place was beautiful and the people were simple. Everyone was normal and hospitable."

He didn't tell the three foreigners that the person standing before them was also one of the abnormalities.

Ryan sighed and said, "I've never encountered so many abnormalities at once, and every one of them is serious."

"This is the most dangerous situation I've ever faced," echoed Valentine.

Lumian was already a little numb to this. He sneered and said, "It's normal that you haven't encountered it before, because those who have encountered one are dead."

"..." Leah looked at him with a smile. "Don't say anything if you can't say something nice. People like you won't survive past childhood elsewhere."

"Killed in the cradle?" Lumian mocked himself and asked Ryan, "Did you get an answer about the deputy padre?"

Ryan nodded.

"In the past few years, similar legends have emerged in various places across the Northern and Southern Continents.

"Legend has it that Heaven banished a group of sinful elves to the ground. They can only reside within human bodies, hoping to

redeem their sins and gain absolution before returning to Heaven.
"In some versions of the legend, these elves appear as translucent lizards.
"However, the elf I'm referring to is not the ancient elf race. It is more akin to a mixture of fairies and various spirits."
Again in recent years? Lumian recalled that the legend of Madame Night had only surfaced recently.
What was wrong with this world?
He pondered for a moment before asking, "Did they specify which deity's Heaven it is?"
Ryan shook his head.
"What's remarkable is that every person who claims to have seen an elf believes it is from the kingdom of their local deity."
The local deity referred to the orthodox gods of the local faith.
Heavens of different deities? Lumian gazed up at the azure sky.
Did that lizard-like elf come from the sky?
However, according to Aurore, beyond the sky lay the cosmos. Each star represented a world.
So, were these extraterrestrial beings?
Or were they from an astral plane beyond mysticism?
As Lumian's thoughts raced, he asked curiously, "In some versions of the legend, these elves appear as translucent lizards. What about the other details?"
Ryan shook his head once more.
"That's all they could uncover in a short period. They may need to communicate with headquarters for more information."
Leah pondered and spoke, "I am familiar with the legend of elves."
"I once met a native of Lenburg who shared that farmers in many regions of the south-central zone have reported mischievous fairies in recent years. These creatures known as Alpes would vandalize their homes and fields or play pranks on them."
The south-central zone referred to the area where Lenburg, Masin, Segar, and other small countries were located. It also included a few areas in the Intis Republic, the Loen Kingdom, and the Feynapotter Kingdom.
Most of them were located in the highlands, mountains, forests, areas filled with ruins and legends.
Lumian listened attentively and concluded, This is not an isolated phenomenon...
"Each elf seems to have their unique way of causing trouble," Ryan mused. "And the lizards that inhabit human bodies are perhaps the most malevolent. It is uncertain if they are the most dangerous. With so many abnormalities in Cordu, the parasitic elf shouldn't be an isolated phenomenon. Perhaps someone wants to

use it to control the deputy padre."
Very clear line of thinking... Lumian looked at the villagers who were returning home after finishing their work and said to Leah and the others, "Meet me behind the hill where the administrator's castle is at 3:30 p.m.
"Will you join me to search for clues?"
"Of course," Ryan agreed.
Leah, however, called out to Lumian before he left, "Is that all? You should brief us on the situation in the castle, its inhabitants, and Madame Pualis' abnormality. We cannot explore and search without preparation."
Lumian did not want to recall Madame Pualis' matters, but he had to admit that Leah's request made sense. He had to endure the discomfort and tell them the entire story.
Ryan and the others were mentally prepared, but they still looked a little dull upon hearing the tale.
Leah lightened the mood with her tinkling laughter.
"It does not matter to me. I might experience such a thing in the future. This is an opportunity that most men never encounter. You must cherish it."
However, Valentine ignored her joke and whispered with a cold expression, "All of this needs to be purified—purified!"
Lumian did not want to provoke Valentine and waved his hand.
"See you in the afternoon."
After taking a few steps, Lumian turned around to look at Ryan warily and asked, "Did Bertrand have any knowledge of the contents of your telegram?"
Bertrand was responsible for the telegraph, and if he knew about the date and the legend of the elves, it meant that the administrator knew as well. And if the administrator knew, Madame Pualis would know too.
"Don't worry," Ryan said reassuringly. "We have a secret code. He won't be able to decipher it."
Lumian breathed a sigh of relief only then and left the village square, heading back to his building.
As he walked a distance away, he spotted Ava Lizier herding a flock of white geese back home.
"Hey there, isn't this our Spring Elf?" Lumian tried to push the bloody and cruel scenes from the Lent celebration out of his mind and greeted Ava with his usual quip.
Ava seemed a little embarrassed.
"I haven't been chosen yet!"
Her exquisite facial features made her grayish-white dress look less rustic.

"That won't be a problem," Lumian said with a smile. "Reimund and I will help you campaign for votes."
Ava looked surprised. "You don't know?"
"What don't I know?" Lumian's heart skipped a beat.
Had something happened in the village that wasn't a part of the "historical" process?
Ava observed his expression and suspected that he was teasing her.
After a few seconds, the girl frowned in concern and said, "Reimund's missing. You didn't know?"
"Huh?" Lumian was so shocked that he couldn't hide his expression as usual.
In the previous, previous cycle, he and Reimund Greg had met almost every day from the second day of March 30th until April 5th, Lent.
Back then, they had followed the waterside ritual procedure to lift Reimund, who had thrown the last offering, and throw him into the river. Like the others in the past, Reimund swam further away and could only return home after leaving the ritual site. He wouldn't leave the house until night.
In the two cycles that followed, Lumian had too much to do and didn't have time to find Reimund.
But now, Ava was telling him that Reimund was missing today!
This was something that had never happened in the previous, previous cycle!
Upon seeing Lumian's expression, Ava's aqua-blue eyes cleared of confusion.
"You really have no idea... Reimund's father may come to you today to ask where Reimund has gone."
Lumian suppressed the tumultuous waves in his heart and asked, "When did Reimund disappear?"
Could it be that something happened because I didn't follow the historical process of finding him?
"Two days ago," Ava recalled. "It's said that he didn't return after leaving the house in the afternoon of the 29th. His family assumed he was at Ol' Tavern or chatting with the Greenwatchers. They only began searching for him last night. They should be asking you today..."
She paused and lowered her voice.
"They suspect Reimund of sneaking away because he doesn't want to learn how to shepherd."
They think I instigated him, and are questioning me later? Lumian roughly understood what had happened.
The afternoon of the 29th reminded him of the beginning of the

cycle.
The last two cycles had started on the afternoon of the 29th!
In other words, Reimund disappeared from the beginning of the cycle? This means that perhaps no one deliberately changed the course of history because it was too late... Then why is there such an anomaly and difference? Lumian fell into deep thought.
Ava glanced at him and asked softly, "Do you know where Reimund went?"
"I haven't seen him in the past few days," Lumian said truthfully.
He began to suspect that Reimund's disappearance had something to do with being thrown into the river during the previous, previous cycle.
However, it was impossible for Reimund to leave Cordu because of this. That would trigger the loop.
After bidding farewell to Ava, Lumian forced himself to remain calm and returned home.
He couldn't be bothered to discuss anything else. Initially, he divulged Reimund's disappearance to Aurore.
Aurore's countenance turned solemn as she furrowed her brows and whispered, "If you hadn't mentioned it, I would have completely forgotten about this person..."
She donned a simple rose-red dress and paced back and forth. Lumian began to contemplate potential reasons.
After a while, Aurore gazed at her brother and uttered solemnly, "I recollect that the crux of the Lent Waterside ritual is to offer sacrifices to the concept of a water source symbolized by the river. Is it probable that Reimund, who was thrown into the water, was also regarded as a sacrifice and was taken away by a certain entity?
"Subsequently, as there was no corresponding tangible reward, the cycle portrayed his absence as a disappearance."
Lumian shook his head. "That will trigger the cycle."
Humans departing Cordu and the surrounding vicinity acted as a trigger.
Aurore asked in a profound voice, "What if it's in the form of a corpse?"
",

Chapter 64: Weapon

In the form of a corpse?

Lumian's heart sank upon hearing that.

If Reimund's body had left the loop due to the sacrifice, he wouldn't be able to revive through the loop. Once the abnormality in Cordu was resolved, he would truly be dead and not just missing.

Although Lumian wasn't willing to admit that a foolish chap like Reimund was his friend, they had known each other for almost five years. They had played together, pranked together, and experienced many things together. Regardless, he couldn't treat him as a stranger.

Recalling the past, he realized that other than Aurore, Reimund was probably the person he interacted with the most.

Didn't Aurore often say that the fools are the lucky ones? Why is this happening? Lumian couldn't help but retort, "Even if he became a corpse, there will still be a spirit. It will trigger the cycle."

Aurore sighed softly.

"Perhaps the entity receiving the sacrifice isn't interested in spirits and only wants flesh and blood? Perhaps He didn't want to trigger the loop and only wanted flesh and blood instead of Reimund's spirit, leaving him in Cordu or directly destroying him?"

In that case, Reimund's corpse was equivalent to pure matter without any spirituality. It could leave the loop without triggering a reboot.

Upon hearing his sister's retort, Lumian's mind instantly replayed what might have happened.

After everyone left the water, Reimund swam further away. Suddenly, an invisible force grabbed his legs, covered his mouth, and dragged him to the depths of the river, where he drowned.

After that, his spirit would remain at the bottom of the river or be destroyed. His corpse would drift to an unknown place and become a sacrifice...

At this thought, Lumian suddenly became inspired.

"Regardless of whether Reimund's spirit was left behind or destroyed, once the cycle restarts, he should appear in the form of a ghost."

"Logically speaking, that's correct." Aurore nodded thoughtfully. "After dark, I'll hold a psychic ritual and see if I can find Reimund's spirit. Yes, it's best if we have something he often uses as a medium."

Lumian replied without hesitation, "After exploring the castle in the afternoon, I'll go to Reimund's place. His parents are looking for me to ask about his whereabouts anyway."

When the time came, with his Hunter skills and Lumian's vigilance, it wouldn't be difficult for him to obtain an item that Reimund had used.
"Okay." Aurore didn't object.
Lumian exhaled and asked, "Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, are you capable of channeling spirits?"
"As a Mystery Pryer, I possess knowledge on various subjects," Aurore chuckled in self-deprecation. "How did your conversation with the three foreigners go?"
Lumian quickly recounted his discussion with the enigmatic lady and his conversation with Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, but he avoided mentioning the entity's prayer.
Aurore listened attentively and let out a sigh.
"It's perilous to actively resist corruption, but it's the only way to explore the dream ruins, uncover their secrets, and find the key to break the cycle. It'll be a difficult journey for you..."
"What's so terrible about it?" Lumian patted his chest. "I'm saving myself."
Aurore nodded slightly.
"You can use my gray amber perfume. We have lilac at home, and I also have deer musk and candle-making ingredients. Only tulips need to be acquired elsewhere.
"I remember Madame Pualis has a garden, but I don't know if it's blooming."
"It has bloomed," Lumian affirmed with certainty.
During the last cycle, when he and Aurore visited the castle to borrow the carriage, they noticed that many flowers in the garden had already bloomed, which was unusual for early spring in the mountains.
Aurore acknowledged tersely.
"Regardless, you must explore the castle in the afternoon. You can pick a few flowers while you're at it. Will that woman send those items into the dream ruins for you?"
"Yes," Lumian replied, feeling confident in his assumption.
Aurore pondered for a moment before saying, "I'll give you the Integrity Brooch before you depart this afternoon. Madame Pualis' castle is filthy, and it might involve the undead. It could be very useful."
"It's not necessary. Keep it with you to protect yourself from Madame Pualis," Lumian insisted, anticipating his sister's objections. "Valentine is a fanatical believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun. According to you, as a Beyonder, he should have chosen the Sun pathway. He would be more useful than the Integrity Brooch."
Based on Aurore's observations over the past few years, fanatical

believers of the Eternal Blazing Sun typically chose the Sun pathway.
This also made sense. Eternal Blazing Sun believers who chose the Sun pathway tended to become more and more fanatical unless they didn't believe in this true god from the beginning.
"That's true," Aurore conceded. "You can practice the simplest way to activate Spirit Vision. Afterward, take a nap at noon to replenish your energy. I'll teach you the ancient Hermes and Hermes words required for the ritual tonight."
Upon hearing his sister's words, Lumian suddenly recalled something she often said when she was rushing her manuscripts: "The schedule is tight, and the task is enormous."
.....
At 3:20 PM, Lumian stood on the hillside overlooking the administrator's castle when he spotted Madame Pualis approaching the village with her lady's maid, Cathy. Madame Pualis wore a stunning grayish-blue dress that had a slight fluffiness to it, and her hair was tied back in an elegant bun.
As soon as they were out of sight, Lumian hurried to the back of the hill where Ryan, Leah, and Valentine were already waiting. They appeared to be in their original clothes, having made no preparations for what was to come.
Lumian was surprised to see that they were unarmed and asked, "You're not carrying any weapons?"
Ryan, who was only slightly taller than 1.7 meters, smiled and replied, "I don't need to carry a weapon with me."
Valentine, dressed in a white vest and a thin blue tweed coat, echoed Ryan's sentiment, "I don't need a weapon."
Leah, on the other hand, pulled out a small, exquisite, silver revolver from her Marseillan boots. "This is my weapon."
She flipped open the barrel to reveal different colored bullets engraved with various patterns and symbols. "They have different Beyonder effects."
Pa! Leah snapped the barrel shut and asked Lumian with a smile, "What weapon did you bring?"
One of you doesn't need a weapon, the other doesn't need to carry a weapon with him, and one has such a good-looking and powerful revolver. It makes me look silly... He lifted the dark jacket on his back to reveal an iron-black axe tucked into his belt.
Without waiting for Ryan and the others to speak, he sighed and said, "You all act like Beyonders, and I'm like a gangster preparing for a fight."
Leah chuckled, her bells tinkling along, "You have a talent for self-deprecation."

"It's better than being mocked by others," Lumian pointed to the steep hill behind them. "Let's climb up now. We can't waste any more time."
"Alright." Leah, in her tight dress, was the first to climb.
She moved with agility and her balance was exceptional. Using the grooves in the terrain, she ascended the hill with ease.
What was even more remarkable was that the four silver bells on her person remained motionless and silent.
Lumian followed closely behind, using the Hunter potion to strengthen his body and scaling the previously unclimbable hill with the help of rocks and tree roots, although he wasn't as carefree and nimble as his companion.
After regaining his balance, he glanced back and witnessed Ryan seizing Valentine's shoulder and hoisting him up.
In a swift motion, Ryan vaulted onto a jutting boulder amidst the hill.
Without hesitation, he sprang forward once more, delivering Valentine to Lumian and Leah's vicinity.
Throughout the entire endeavor, his physique appeared to have expanded in size.
This left Lumian in awe.
Although the hill wasn't high, it was still too exaggerated to be scaled with just two jumps.
Hunters definitely couldn't do it!
After snapping out of his daze, Lumian looked at the castle-shaped building with two towers and the surrounding garden. He suggested to the three foreigners, "We'll go around to the back door."
"Wait a moment." Ryan stopped him and glanced at Leah.
Leah remained silent and strode two steps towards the rear entrance of the castle-like structure.
Her lips moved soundlessly, muttering something under her breath.
In the next instant, the four small silver bells attached to her veil and boots jingled.
The sound was not deafening, but it was urgent and intense.
Leah pivoted and addressed Lumian and the rest, "It's a treacherous path. A grave problem, indeed."
With that, she took two steps towards the front entrance.
Ding, ding, ding. The bells continued to ring, growing even more insistent and pressing.
"We'll likely encounter significant trouble if we attempt to enter through the front," Leah's tone was severe, but there was a hint of a smile on her face.

"What if we climb in through a window?" Ryan inquired.
Leah nodded and altered course, making her way towards the garden.
This time, although the bells rang, they were faint and slow.
Leah grinned and exhaled, "This route is safe."
Lumian, who had observed the entire process, felt bewildered. He couldn't fathom what the three foreigners were up to.
Is this how Beyonders operate? He recollected his sister's teachings and queried, "Divining the danger?"
"Indeed." Leah nodded and turned to Valentine. "I'll scout ahead. Be prepared."
"Understood," Valentine responded gravely.
"What preparations?" Lumian asked, confused.
Leah chuckled. "Prepare to cast divine spells and conjure flames."
Then, what's the purpose of creating flames? Before Lumian could ask, Leah had strolled into the garden and headed towards the castle.
She arrived at a window and signaled that everything was clear.
"Let's go," Ryan informed the group as he hastened towards Leah.
Valentine and Lumian followed closely behind.
As they passed a bed of tulips, Lumian reached out to pluck one, but Ryan stopped him with his forearm.
He didn't ask Lumian why he was doing this and only said gently, "There's no hurry. We can pick flowers later. If picking it causes some incident, our mission will be compromised."
That's true... Lumian fully drew upon this experience.
Soon, they arrived at a row of windows on the side of the castle.

Chapter 65: Third Floor

The administrator's official residence was originally the castle of the DariÃ¨ge nobles, with defense being the top priority. The windows were narrow and high up, making the lighting poor even during the day. However, to make it suitable for living, the owner had installed many new glass windows on the ground floor later on.

Lumian peered through the patterned glass and saw that the banquet hall was empty and deserted.

"There are very few servants..." Leah sighed softly.

With many open windows during the day, fresh air mixed with the fragrance of flowers flowed in, creating excellent conditions for Lumian and the others to infiltrate.

Taking advantage of the lack of servants on the first floor, the four of them climbed into the hall one after another. However, they didn't rush to go deeper and instead found a hiding spot nearby.

Leah turned her head towards Valentine, who was clinging close behind an ornamental pillar, and said, "I'll scout ahead; make preparations."

"Okay," Valentine nodded coldly.

Lumian was squatting behind a stone platform with a porcelain vase. When he heard this, he stuck his head out and reminded them,

"There's no need to explore the first floor.

"It's often used to entertain guests, so there's nothing unusual."

Ever since Administrator Béost and Madame Pualis moved in, his sister Aurore would visit the castle occasionally as a guest or borrow a pony. A few times, Lumian took the opportunity to follow her and freeload on cakes, bread, and drinks.

When the administrator and Madame Pualis were out, he would occasionally look for Louis Lund, the butler, and tour the first floor with him.

"I'll head straight to the stairs," Leah said, understanding.

She didn't attempt to walk in a straight line through the empty banquet hall. Instead, she hugged the wall and circled around towards the stairs.

The four silver bells remained eerily silent.

As she passed by one of the rooms, she suddenly heard footsteps approaching from very close to the door.

Lumian, in a prime position, even caught a glimpse of a male servant in a red shirt and white pants, about to collide head-on with Leah. She had no cover in sight!

Leah didn't panic. She turned around, placed her hand on the wall,

and scaled the oil painting hanging two meters above the ground.
Then, she stood on her tiptoes and stepped onto the frame. She stood firmly with her back against the wall without letting the oil painting drop.
Lumian wanted to applaud because it reminded him of an acrobatic performance he had seen in DariÃ¨ge last year at a circus.
The male servant left the room and instinctively looked around before walking towards the kitchen.
Just as he took a few steps forward, Leah slid soundlessly to the ground against the oil painting. Then, she rolled twice and hid behind a pillar. After the male servant disappeared from the banquet hall, she leaned against the wall again. Finally, she arrived at the staircase and confirmed that everything was clear.
Upon seeing this, Lumian darted out of the stone platform and ran over in a straight line.
He was so fast that he reached Leah in less than three seconds.
However, he wasn't the fastest. Ryan completed the journey in just the time it took to take one breath.
Valentine wasn't slow either. His physique was clearly stronger than ordinary people.
Without another word, Leah took the lead and the four of them hurriedly entered the stairs, arriving at the second floor of the residence.
There were closed rooms on both sides of the corridor, with two rooms having light shine in through the windows at the end of the corridor. The overall environment was abnormally dark.
Ryan suggested, surveying their surroundings.
"Let us split up and search different rooms. This will save time and make it easier to hide. However, we must remain no more than one room apart from each other, in case something happens and we cannot save each other in time."
Leah and the others nodded in agreement.
Lumian promptly approached the nearest room, pressing his ear to the door to listen for any movement inside. After a moment, he deftly turned the handle and slipped inside.
The room belonged to a maid.
He searched for a while, but found no clues. He moved on to the next room.
In this way, the four of them carefully avoided the servants and explored most of the second floor.
Towards the end of their search, Lumian arrived at the door of the room that had traumatized him: Louis Lund's bedroom!
According to the historical sequence of events, this butler should

have given birth yesterday.
His stomach had been torn open and, even with sutures, he would not recover quickly. He must be recuperating in bed... Lumian thought to himself, contemplating whether to push the door open and have a "chat" with Louis Lund.
As someone who had personally experienced bizarre phenomena, this male butler undoubtedly knew a great deal.
However, this would contradict their principle of observation and exploration. Lumian couldn't guarantee that Louis Lund wouldn't reveal his presence to Madame Pualis.
The fact that he had given birth to the other party's child meant there were no secrets between them.
Silencing him would only confirm Madame Pualis's suspicions.
What a pity. If only I knew something about hypnosis... Lumian sighed inwardly. He habitually pressed his ear to the door, listening for any sound.
Nothing.
As a Hunter, Lumian's hearing was acute enough to detect breathing from two to three meters away even with a barrier in between.
No one? Louis Lund has just given birth. *Where can he go?* Lumian turned the doorknob and slowly pushed the door open, peering inside.
The room was clean and free of the bloodstains he had seen before. Louis Lund was nowhere to be found.
Lumian furrowed his brow and stepped inside.
The signs of a recent human presence were evident: a blanket rumpled on the bed, a cigarette butt on the nightstand, a black coat hung on the chair, and faint footprints on the floor. In addition, there were blood stains on the edge of the bed that had not been cleaned.
Apart from this, Lumian also saw some blood stains that hadn't been wiped off from the edge of the bed.
Lumian nodded to himself. He had indeed given birth here yesterday...
Suddenly, faint voices outside the window caught his attention.
He hurried to the glass window, turned his body, and peered out.
In the stables, Louis Lund--black-haired, blue-eyed, and dressed in a white shirt, black suit, dark pants, and leather shoes--conversed with the carriage driver, Sewell, who had sent the siblings to Paramita.
Lumian was taken aback by Louis Lund's healthy and steady appearance.
Is this the person who had just given birth yesterday?

And it was a C-section!
Lumian suppressed the shock in his heart and listened carefully to what Louis Lund and Sewell were saying.
Unexpectedly, these two fellows were only exchanging experiences in gardening.
"What's the matter?" With Lumian inside the room for so long, Ryan, donning a dark bowler hat, pushed open the door and entered the room followed by Leah and Valentine.
Lumian quickly filled them in on Louis Lund's situation.
Ryan pondered for a moment before asking, "Have you heard of Earth Mother?"
The DariÃ¨ge region had a border with the Feynapotter kingdom. Shepherds often went there. Coupled with his sister's basic education, Lumian was no stranger to this.
"Yes, the deity that Feynapotter believes in."
Ryan nodded and said, "Earth Mother is associated with fertility, healing, and life. These domains are reflected in the Beyonder powers of the corresponding pathway. While I'm not saying that Louis Lund's situation is related to the Earth Mother, it's possible that his ability to give birth and quick recovery are linked to these domains."
"Is that so..." Lumian found this plausible after some thought.
After all, men were already capable of giving birth. What was so strange about them being out and about after a C-section?
"Did you find anything?" Lumian asked Ryan and the others.
Ryan shook his head.
"They were all normal servant's quarters. We may have to check the third floor."
Lumian felt a sense of unease wash over him.
Madame Pualis and Administrator Béost's quarters comprised a bedroom, study, solarium, and activity room, all located on the third floor.
This posed a significant risk.
"Very well," Ryan replied without hesitation.
The four of them proceeded to sneak up to the third floor.
Many of the doors were ajar, and the corridor was brightly lit.
Lumian made a beeline for the bedroom, which was adorned with a light-colored velvet blanket on the bed, a small bookshelf stocked with bedtime reading materials, a capacious cloakroom brimming with a variety of clothes, a safe containing precious collections, a set of plush beige sofas, a table displaying five photo frames and documents, and a fluffy white carpet covering the entire room...
Lumian and company surveyed the room and simultaneously headed towards the table.

The books on the table were mostly popular novels, including Fors Wall's masterpiece, "The Adventurer 5: Vice Admiral Ailment," and Aurore's latest work, "The Substitute Detective." The documents pertained mainly to various matters in the DariÃ¨ge area. As for the five photos displayed in the frames, four were of Madame Pualis, and one belonged to a man Lumian did not recognize.

"No photo of the administrator?" he exclaimed, surprised.

Madame Pualis was the sole subject of the four photos, each depicting her in different clothing and poses. The male photo was not of Administrator Béost, who, after all, was the male owner of the house. Wasn't this peculiar?

Leah nodded thoughtfully.

"Perhaps the administrator's status in this family is akin to that of a butler. Have you ever seen a butler's photograph displayed in someone's home?"

"Then who is this man?" Lumian inquired, pointing to the photo frame on the side.

The frame contained a color photograph of a man in his late twenties. He was wearing a red shirt, a black velvet coat, and dark pants with tassels. He sported a pair of short lace-up boots and was dressed very fashionably.

He bore a striking resemblance to Madame Pualis, with light eyebrows, bright brown eyes, and brown hair parted in an exaggerated 7-3 style. His lips were curled up, giving him the air of a hooligan who frequented high society.

All in all, this man's facial features were not extraordinary, but they were pleasing to the eye.

"Madame Pualis's brother?" Lumian hazarded a guess based on his appearance.

Chapter 66: Crib

Leah gazed at the man in the photo, lost in thought.

"After receiving the request for help, we set off two days later to gather relevant information," she said.

"Madame Pualis's full name is Pualis de Roquefort, isn't it?" she paused for a moment before continuing, "We investigated the Roquefort family in Dariège and found no trace of Pualis."

In Intis, a woman could choose to keep her maiden name after getting married. If there was a "de" in her name, it meant that she was once a noble. The Intis meaning of "de" was "from," and the surname behind it was the fiefdom of the time.

"None?" Lumian was surprised. He knew something was wrong with Madame Pualis, but he didn't expect her identity to be fake!

Ryan nodded. "In Dariège, Roquefort is a large family with many members, including a provincial senator. We were in a hurry and didn't have time to conduct a more detailed investigation. We could only confirm that there was no such person as Pualis, but a man named Pulitt had been missing for over a year."

"Pulitt?" Lumian asked. "What's his relationship with Madame Pualis? They look alike."

Ryan shook his head. "Without enough information, it's impossible to make a guess. What we do know is that Pulitt de Roquefort was a popular dandy in Trier, and he had many illegitimate children. Many people hated and detested him. Perhaps this is why he had no choice but to leave or was forced to leave Dariège."

"Dandyism?" Lumian was unfamiliar with the term.

Aurore subscribed to magazines and newspapers targeted towards women or focused on national affairs. There were some materials on the supernatural, but none involved male matters.

Leah chuckled. "To put it simply, it's a casanova who dresses fashionably, speaks elegantly, and acts freely."

Lumian sighed and mocked, "The people of Trier sure know how to live life. They package their affairs as a thought, a doctrine, and a trend."

When it came to cheating, Triers were at the forefront. The padre? In front of the Triers, he was still a child.

.....

"In the past year, Trier has constructed numerous arcades," Aurore remarked while sipping her marquis black tea, regaling Madame Pualis, Nazélie and the others with the latest trends from her two-story subterranean abode.

"What's an arcade? It's a covered street with glass roofing and marble flooring. Elegant and stunning shops line both sides.

During the day, light filters in from above, and at night, gas lamps illuminate the area. Carriages are prohibited from entering. The most renowned arcade is called the Opera House arcade..."
Madame Pualis, holding a white porcelain cup filled with black tea, watched Aurore with her bright brown eyes, listening intently with a smile.
"That sounds like something I must see..." Nazélie sighed, imagining the elegance, fashion, cleanliness and brightness of the arcade.
Aurore's knowledge of the latest Intis trends was the primary reason why they had accepted the afternoon tea invitation.
After chatting for a while, the discussion turned to Aurore's work and relationships.
"Love is just so unfathomable and elusive..." Madame Pualis mused aloud.
So, this is why you fall in love with so many men at the same time? Aurore couldn't help but inwardly criticize.
Madame Pualis gazed at her with a faint smile and sighed.
"Sometimes, I get so angry because of his mistakes. I wish I could kill him and send him to his death, but when he's actually facing death, I can't help but save him and refuse to tell him. Perhaps, this is love..."
.....
In the master's bedroom of the administrator's residence.
"Madame Pualis may have once fallen in love with Pulitt, a believer in Dandyism, and engaged in a forbidden relationship, resulting in her disavowal by her family. She then had to marry someone and use her family's connections to secure the administrative position in Cordu for him." Lumian deduced this based on the stories and troupes written by his sister.
This explained why Administrator Béost's standing in the family was relatively low.
"Perhaps," Ryan replied simply, "Keep searching, but don't attempt to open the safe or anything that may trigger an alarm."
Lumian and his companions dispersed immediately and searched elsewhere.
Despite the Hunter's ability to observe subtle traces, Lumian still found nothing.
The same was true for Leah and the others.
They had no choice but to move to the study and search patiently.
As time passed, the four of them arrived at the end of the corridor, where a closed room stood opposite an open solarium. Beside it was a staircase leading to one of the towers.
Ryan, who had finished searching the solarium, turned to Leah.

Leah touched the small silver bell hanging from her veil, mumbling to herself as she walked towards the tightly shut wooden door.
This time, the four bells did not ring.
Leah heaved a sigh of relief and gently pushed the wooden door open.
It was an empty room with a rocking crib in the middle.
The crib was made of brown wood and installed inside a wooden frame. It was covered in clean but slightly worn cotton swaddling cloth that showed its age. The crib was empty.
This was the nursery where Madame Pualis's two children had once slept. Apart from the bed, there were no toys in the room. Scattered on the ground were wheat, barley, rice, rye, wheat, and other plants, making it look rather strange.
Furthermore, these plants were well-preserved, as if they had only been brought in a few days ago.
Valentine's body glowed as he entered the room and circled around.
Soon, he returned to the door and shook his head at Ryan and Leah.
"There's no evil aura."
"Alright." Leah looked at Lumian. "Shall we head to the tower next?"
Lumian had always been curious about the castle's two towers. He never expected to have a chance to "visit" them today.
Valentine left the strange nursery. Ryan grabbed the handle and planned to close the wooden door and restore it to its original state.
At this moment, Lumian's gaze drifted inside.
The brown wooden crib swayed gently, yet the tightly shut windows of the room and the solarium opposite, with their floor-to-ceiling panes, allowed no breeze to enter the corridor!
"Wh..." Lumian's pupils dilated.
Leah noticed his distress and turned to look.
The crib continued to sway, as though an invisible baby lay within its swaddling cloths.
Leah raised her hand to her glabella, as if trying to ease her tired eyes.
She readied herself to activate her Spirit Vision and see what lay inside the crib.
Suddenly, the four small silver bells on her veil and boots jingled, as if they were about to burst!
Ryan's face froze as he yelled, "Get out of here!"
With that, he dashed into the solarium, crashing through the floor-to-ceiling windows in an attempt to create a path of escape

from the castle.
Bang!
A loud thud echoed throughout the room as Ryan hit the windows, yet there was no sound of glass shattering.
The transparent faces of young children appeared on the row of windows, some of them mere infants with pale, inexplicably terrifying faces.
As Ryan 'bumped' into them, they opened their mouths in unison and let out a haunting wail.
Their cries echoed through the third floor of the castle, casting an eerie gloom over the entire area. The walls and glass were adorned with the translucent faces of children, some wailing while others stared blankly at Lumian, Leah, Valentine, and Ryan.
Lumian shuddered with fear as he felt their cold gazes upon him.
Suddenly, Valentine's body was engulfed in a dark golden light, which quickly spread to envelop Lumian, Leah, and himself.
A warm sensation spread throughout Lumian's body, dispelling his fear and filling him with courage. He drew his iron-black axe with newfound confidence.
Meanwhile, Ryan seemed to grow taller and more imposing.
Dawn-like rays of light surrounded him, coalescing into a silver-white full-body armor and a massive broadsword of light.
With a mighty swing, Ryan cleaved at the floor-to-ceiling windows, dispersing the pale-white faces of the children into smoke as they screamed.
But the glass didn't break, and more faces appeared, their shrill cries tormenting Lumian and his companions.
"Who dares to trespass the castle?"
A woman's voice boomed, echoing through the halls.
Almost immediately, Lumian spotted a figure on the other side of the corridor, standing on the second floor.
She was a middle-aged woman with brown hair and eyes. She was rather good-looking without any wrinkles. She was the midwife who had helped Louis Lund's "delivery."
In her hand, she held a pair of enormous scissors that could decapitate a human while donning a grayish-white gown. It was as if she had just returned from pruning a branch in the garden.
She glared at Lumian and his companions and spoke in a deep, threatening voice.
"You deserve to die!"
.....
In the subterranean two-story abode, Madame Pualis jolted suddenly, and her countenance altered.
She delicately placed the porcelain teacup on the table and smiled

at Aurore.
"My apologies. I've just recollected an urgent matter that requires my immediate attention at home."
"Huh?" Aurore was shocked.
Pualis rose from her seat, her expression filled with regret.
"I had intended to stay and discuss your work and its beautiful and poignant portrayal of love."
Aurore responded quickly, "Please, you're more than welcomed."
"I cannot, unfortunately." Madame Pualis shook her head. "It concerns my children."

Chapter 67: Evil Spells

Valentine caught sight of the woman in the grayish-white dress. His eyes brimmed with hatred as he stretched his arms out as if embracing the sun.

A blinding pillar of light descended from the sky and struck the target clutching the enormous scissors.

The surroundings burst into light in an instant. The transparent faces on the walls and glass vanished before they could even scream.

The woman's body had clearly caught fire and was evaporating, but then it suddenly vanished.

Lumian found this scene eerily familiar. The mouth-orifice monster had displayed similar behavior when he was hunting it.

Invisibility!

The woman might not have concealed herself, but she certainly wasn't dead. Thus, Lumian didn't feel any relief. Instead, he approached Ryan, who now towered over him.

Ryan, covered in silver armor and wielding a broadsword of light, was the person Lumian trusted the most among those present.

It was evident that Ryan excelled at combat!

Leah stood there when suddenly, the face of a pale child emerged on the wall behind her, transforming into the woman in the grayish-white dress.

The woman's enormous scissors clamped down on Leah's neck.

Crack!

Leah's head drooped, but no blood spurted forth. Her body and head swiftly shriveled and thinned, transforming into a ragged, paper effigy that softly settled onto the ground.

Not far away, her silhouette donning a pleated cashmere dress outlined itself.

With a clang, Ryan, his face concealed by a silver visor, hoisted the Sword of Dawn and strode towards the spot where Leah had stood, sweeping the weapon diagonally at the woman.

The woman brandished her scissors in an attempt to block the attack, but was pushed back into the wall by the force of the blow.

Her form vanished once again.

As Valentine, clad in a thin blue tweed jacket, stood with his back turned, the woman suddenly replaced the swollen and pallid visage.

She leaned out and struck the nape of Valentine's neck.

"Look out!" Leah cried out as soon as she spotted the woman, alerting her companion.

Valentine snorted and crossed his arms.

Golden, illusory flames burst forth from the void surrounding him, intertwining and transforming the corridor into an ocean pulsating with the radiance of the sun.
The woman winced in agony as her body was consumed by the intense flames.
She retreated back into the "interior" of the walls, reverting to the swollen, pallid face.
The translucent face melted instantly into wisps of black gas within the golden, illusory flames before dissipating.
Clang!
Ryan's Sword of Dawn struck the same spot again, causing the entire castle to tremble.
Despite his efforts, he was still a step too late to stop the woman.
Lumian quickly grasped the gravity of the situation. The woman who had delivered Louis Lund was linked to the transparent faces of children on the wall and glass. Not only could she transform into one of them, but she could also transform into a ghost form, evading attacks and deflecting damage.
In other words, she could attack from any wall or glass on the third floor of the castle at any given time, and Ryan and the others' counterattacks were ineffective.
With this realization, Lumian immediately distanced himself from the floor-to-ceiling windows and the surrounding walls, and walked to the middle of the solarium.
At that moment, ghostly faces appeared on the ground and ceiling.
The woman suddenly emerged from behind Lumian's feet and quickly reached for his thigh with the pair of scissors.
Lumian's heart raced with a sense of danger.
Without bothering to confirm where the attack was coming from, he jumped into the air and dodged to the side.
Despite his efforts, he was still half a beat too slow. A deep gash was left on the lower part of his thigh, and blood instantly gushed out.
As soon as the drops of blood landed on the ground, the woman—who had switched spots—pointed at them and they condensed into a thin blood-colored figure.
Without any hesitation, the blood-colored figure turned to Lumian, who had rolled to the recliner, and pounced at him,
feeding on his blood and growing stronger with each drop.
At the same time, Lumian endured intense pain and felt his blood running out of control.
Almost instantly, Ryan jumped in.
In midair, he raised the broadsword of light high and slashed at the blood-colored figure, pinning it to the ground and shattering it

with the transparent faces around him.
Leah had somersaulted to Lumian's side and pressed her right hand on his thigh wound.
To Lumian's surprise, the wound magically moved along with Leah's right palm, all the way down to the side of his calf, which wasn't rich in blood vessels.
The bleeding immediately decreased.
The woman suddenly appeared from the ceiling. Her brown eyes burned with a blazing life.
The blood dripping from Lumian's calf was ignited, producing a bright flame that resembled the spring sun. It quickly spread deep into the wound and into the blood vessels in his body.
At that moment, Lumian felt his life rapidly draining away.
With a pop, Ryan stabbed the two-handed broadsword condensed from light into the ground.
Around him, in the area where Lumian and Leah were, rays of dawn-like light appeared, filling all space.
In the morning light, the remaining blood-colored figures quickly melted, and the bright and beautiful flames on Lumian's calf quickly extinguished.
The second of burning had sealed his wounds together, stopping the bleeding.
Ryan pulled out his broadsword and bellowed in a deep, commanding voice, "This environment is unsuitable. We must depart at once!"
What he really meant was that the woman was not as powerful as she appeared. She was almost invincible and impossible to target due to the unique conditions on the third floor of the castle that greatly enhanced her abilities.
Without waiting for his companions to react, Ryan charged after the woman.
Although he was still slightly slower than his opponent, who could move with the aid of translucent faces, he spared no effort and attacked with powerful slashes, diagonal cuts, and stabs. He forced his adversary into a constant state of motion, forcing her to constantly shift positions after each attack.
Together with the holy light summoned by Valentine and the golden flames he conjured, the two of them managed to temporarily subdue the woman, thus preventing Leah and Lumian from being harmed.
Taking advantage of this opportunity, Leah leapt onto the armchair and dashed back and forth across the sofa, tables, recliners, and ornaments, making sure to avoid touching the ground.

Throughout this process, the silver bells on her veil and boots chimed incessantly, sometimes melodious and sometimes grating.
Lumian no longer felt safe on the ground. He climbed onto the table and scanned the ceiling above and the floor below, analyzing Leah's movements.
Drawing from his previous experience, he deduced the route the woman was attempting to use to escape.
Soon, Leah ceased her acrobatic maneuvers.
"To the tower, quickly!"
Just as she finished speaking, the woman thrust her head out of the ceiling and barked in a stern voice, "You damned bastards!"
Each word was enunciated with precision, causing Lumian and his companions' hearts to race, their heads to spin, and their vision to blur. It was a thoroughly unpleasant experience.
Valentine endured the discomfort and stretched his arms out once more.
A brilliant and pristine light flooded the ceiling.
"Let's move!" Ryan commanded.
Lumian immediately leaped off the table, enduring the pain in his calf. Stepping on the transparent faces, he raced towards the tower, with Leah and Valentine close behind. Only Ryan, covered in silver armor, wasn't in a rush to escape. He lifted the Sword of Dawn and sliced the woman who had poked her head out, preventing her from stopping his companions from fleeing.
After Leah and the others ascended the stairs leading to the tower, he turned around and gave chase with a leap.
A woman emerged from a transparent face on the side wall and let out a piercing scream.
Accompanied by the scream, a layer of black, malevolent flames ignited on the surface of Ryan's silver armor.
Ryan immediately felt his stamina rapidly depleting.
Without hesitation, he deactivated the Dawn Armor.
Spots of light resembling the morning sun scattered in all directions, along with the black flames, and dissipated into the air.
Holding the broadsword of light, Ryan took the opportunity to leap and depart from the castle's third floor, entering the stairs.
At this moment, Lumian, aware that he was a little weak and unable to make use of the environment, ran in second place. Ahead of him was Leah, whose silver bell was ringing softly.
Leah suddenly came to a halt.
Lumian hastily slowed down as he heard chattering.
He then looked ahead and was taken aback.
The tower was not large, and it could even be considered small. There were stairs leading to various firing ports.

The walls were densely packed with children.
They were dressed in different clothes. Some appeared to have just been born, while others were three or four years old. Their limbs resembled bird claws with unnaturally sharp tips.
Using their "bird claws," these children were like birds in a forest, perching on the wall and occupying most of the area.
Lumian's scalp tingled as he saw over a hundred human children's faces, bodies, and wicked, sharp bird claws combined with an abnormal perching method. He once again felt as though his mind, eyes, and soul had been corrupted, just as when he had witnessed Louis Lund give birth.
The "children" had not yet noticed the intrusion. A small number of them were happily discussing different topics.
"The sky is so blue out there."
"I want to go outside."
"No way."
"Mummy said we have to be able to retract our claws and be like normal humans before we can go out..."
At that moment, Ryan caught up to the three of them and said urgently, "Stay away!"
He then turned around and barricaded the entrance of the tower like a giant, holding the Sword of Dawn in his hand.
Leah and Valentine didn't inquire why. They ran frantically and found stairs and other obstacles to hide behind. Although Lumian didn't comprehend, his survival instincts told him to follow orders.
"All of you, come down here!"
The woman's sharp voice reverberated.
Each word drilled into Lumian and his companions' ears, weakening them simultaneously.
Immediately afterwards, the woman in the grayish-white dress appeared at the corner of the staircase. The entire tower was filled with the aura of life, and no pale faces were visible.

Chapter 68: Purification

Upon seeing that Ryan was blocking the entrance of the tower with the Sword of Dawn, the woman in the grayish-white dress felt a sense of foreboding.

She swiftly turned the enormous scissors around, clamped them around her neck, and pulled gently.

A vivid red stream of blood gushed out immediately, accompanied by her sharp cry. The blood flowed in every direction as if it had a life of its own, enveloping her entire body.

It was as though the woman had adorned herself with blood-colored full-body armor.

Meanwhile, Ryan held the Sword of Dawn in reverse with both hands and genuflected.

With a pop, he stabbed the two-handed broadsword, which had condensed from light, into the stone floor in front of him.

The broadsword disintegrated, transforming into specks of light that resembled the morning sun.

They were densely packed and innumerable, forming a flickering and violent hurricane that swept forward.

Wherever the Hurricane of Light passed, the stone floor was shaved thin. Some of the steps were flattened, and exaggerated cracks appeared. The woman was completely engulfed before she could dodge.

The blood-colored armor on her body lasted for a second before completely shattering and melting into the light.

This time, she had left the special environment on the third floor and was in a place filled with life force. She could no longer use the pale and transparent faces to shift position. She could only watch as tiny blood-colored cracks appeared on her body.

The cracks expanded rapidly and instantly turned into a hideous wound that cut through the woman.

As her screams reverberated, her body crumbled into pieces of flesh. The pieces of flesh and her spirit were still being ravaged by the storm of light until the hurricane subsided. The flesh was ground, and the spirit dissipated.

Although Ryan tried his best to prevent the Hurricane of Light from implicating the others, he was still too weak to control it. He destroyed a large swath of the walls on the side and the stairs behind him. If Lumian, Leah, and Valentine hadn't found cover in advance, they would have more or less been injured.

"Waa! Waa! Waa!"

The bird-clawed children who were climbing the wall were frightened and cried out.

Lumian and the others' ears buzzed as if they had suffered a noise attack.
"Let's go!" Ryan turned around and slammed into the most damaged wall nearby.
Crash! The wall shattered, and a large number of rocks fell.
A huge hole that humans could crawl through appeared.
When Valentine and Lumian ran over, Ryan grabbed each of them with one hand and jumped from a height of more than ten meters to a tree outside the castle.
Bam! In midair, he kicked the tree and flew diagonally away from the castle.
Leah descended on her own, using the protrusion of the castle's outer walls to descend rapidly, landing on the ground in a breath or two.
Ryan, Lumian, and Valentine waited for Leah for a few seconds as the trees shook violently. After meeting up with her, they ran to the back of the hill and left before the other servants caught up.
.....
In less than a minute, Madame Pualis stood expressionless beside the ruptured hole at the entrance of the tower, wearing a grayish-blue fluffy dress.
The children crawling on the walls quickly accused the outsiders of being barbaric and cruel, calling out for their mother.
Madame Pualis, with an ashen face, remained silent.
.....
In the forest beside Cordu Village.
Lumian and his companions stopped and looked back at the castle.
Leah was about to speak when she frowned and said, "I hear a baby crying, it's very close!" She turned to Ryan and the others and asked, "Can you hear it?"
Lumian was startled and listened carefully, vaguely hearing the sound of a baby crying, but it was not as close as Leah had described, in fact, it sounded distant.
"I can hear it a little," Ryan answered truthfully.
Valentine's expression changed as if he had thought of something.
At the same time, Leah's face twisted in pain, and she instinctively pressed a hand to her abdomen, where there was a distinct swelling and squirming.
Valentine quickly went over to Leah and placed his hand on her head, saying a word in ancient Hermes that Lumian had just learned, "Sun!"
Golden translucent liquid drops condensed out of thin air and sprinkled over Leah's body.
Illusory black smoke immediately rose from Leah's body, and her

expression alternated between distortion and normalcy.
Finally, her abdomen returned to its original state and stopped squirming.
"Phew..." Leah breathed a sigh of relief. "I narrowly avoided becoming a monster's mother. Luckily, we took care of it in time before it could take root."
She wore a smile on her face, unfazed by the bizarre and terrifying experience.
Leah turned to Lumian, Ryan, and Valentine.
"Would you like to purify yourselves with holy water? I worry that you may unknowingly become mothers."
"Yes!" Lumian agreed immediately, but Valentine approached Ryan first. Placing his hand on Ryan's head, he uttered the ancient Hermes word, "Sun!" Holy water formed and sprinkled down, but nothing unusual happened to Ryan.
Valentine purified himself next, and no black smoke appeared.
He then walked over to Lumian and placed his hand on the hunter's head. "Sun!" he repeated, and droplets of translucent liquid fell. Lumian suddenly felt a sharp pain in his heart, as if a snake were burrowing inside. Each time it moved, Lumian's heart raced or slowed down, causing extreme discomfort.
In the next moment, Lumian heard the mysterious voice that seemed to come from an infinite distance but also sounded close by.
It wasn't as clear as in his dream, so it prevented him from entering a near-death state.
Just as Lumian couldn't take it anymore, Valentine stopped the purification and nodded coldly.
"There's nothing wrong with you either."
Phew... Lumian breathed a silent sigh of relief, feeling as though he had been pulled back from the brink of death.
At that moment, he roughly understood what had just happened.
According to the mysterious lady, he was severely corrupted by a certain hidden evil god. He could only maintain his normal state by relying on the timely seal of that great existence.
Accepting the purification of holy water was like a devil embracing holy light—he was bound to experience problems.
In other words, he was an evil god pollutant that needed to be purified!
Thankfully, thankfully. If Valentine had kept going or had been a little stronger, I would've exposed my abnormality even with the seal of that great existence... I can't undergo purification in the future. I won't even be able to find someone to exorcise the evil. I'm the evil that needs to be exorcized... Lumian rejoiced and didn't let

the remnant pain appear on his face.
Upon realizing that his companions had been cleansed and all risks had been eliminated, Ryan promptly suggested, "If we make our way to the edge of the village now, we'll activate the loop. In the event that Madame Pualis discovers a clue and catches up with us, we can attempt to flee and restart the cycle."
Noticing Valentine's perplexed expression, Ryan added, "I'm concerned that if we die once during a cycle, there may be repercussions once the loop is lifted. Therefore, it's best not to perish at this moment."
"Understood," Leah agreed before Valentine could interject with any radical ideas.
Observing that his two companions had arrived at the same conclusion, Valentine simply nodded.
At that moment, Lumian glanced at them before waving his hand and declaring, "You guys go on ahead. I'm going home!"
Ryan furrowed his brow in confusion and asked, "Aren't you worried that Madame Pualis might come after you?"
Lumian grinned and replied, "I'm not like you. As soon as I entered the tower, I was attempting to avoid the monster children's gaze. They didn't spot me, and the midwife who saw me was killed by you. It seems that even channeling spirits is ineffective. How could Madame Pualis have suspected that a powerful infiltration team like yours had an ordinary person like me with them?"
"Think about it. Prior to your arrival in Cordu, no one had attempted to infiltrate the castle. The moment you arrived, something immediately occurred. Who else could be suspected but you guys?"
"If I escape with you, I'll be dragged down with you!"
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine were left speechless.
This was clearly an operation concocted by Lumian. Why did it appear as though he had nothing to do with it in the end?
Were they going to shoulder all the blame?
"Goodbye! If Madame Pualis doesn't dare to confront official Beyonders like you and the cycle isn't restarted, I'll see you at Ol' Tavern tomorrow!" Lumian waved his hand and dashed towards the edge of the forest, reminding them, "Take care, my cabbages!"
Once he exited the forest, Lumian's expression became serious.
The explanation he provided for not escaping with Ryan and the others wasn't the only reason. It was more of an excuse.
His primary objective was to return home immediately and rendezvous with Aurore.
As soon as Aurore invited Madame Pualis for afternoon tea, someone snuck into the castle, and they were the prime suspects.

Lumian had to inform his sister that if Madame Pualis came to interrogate and silence her, she should sell out the three foreigners and agree to Madame Pualis's imprisonment. She could discover and dangle a valuable secret to delay Madame Pualis for a while, preventing her from executing anyone on the spot.
Only by staying alive would there be a chance!
Even in the loop, Lumian couldn't afford to die easily in case something catastrophic occurred once the loop ended!
Furthermore, once Madame Pualis caught up with Leah and the others, if she emerged victorious, one of Ryan and the other two would trigger the loop and erase their memories. If she lost, what was there to be concerned about?
Lumian gritted his teeth and ran home through the village road, enduring the pain in his calf.
Upon seeing Aurore standing at the door, appearing completely unharmed, he breathed a sigh of relief.
"Is everything all right?"
"Is everything all right?"
The siblings both inquired simultaneously.

Chapter 69: Him?

In response to his sister's concern, Lumian shook his head and declared, "I'm fine."

He surveyed his surroundings and suggested, "Let us talk inside."

Upon reaching the stove, he briefly narrated his expedition with Ryan and the others. Lumian then advised his sister that if Madame Pualis were to attack them, she must surrender and betray the three foreigners without hesitation.

Considering the phenomena he had encountered in the castle, Lumian believed that the siblings could not defeat Madame Pualis. They were not even capable of handling the midwife.

Aurore listened attentively and couldn't help but chuckle.

"From a logical standpoint, your tactics are indeed the best, but why do I find it peculiar? It is as though I have become the villain in a story. Furthermore, I am not the principal antagonist—the charismatic kind."

"What is important is the consequence," Lumian stressed to his sister. "In your own words, one must endure the humiliation, bear the heavy burden, preserve the useful body, and wait for it to prove its worth in the future."

Aurore couldn't help but rub her forehead. "Have I taught you too many strange things?"

"Yes," Lumian earnestly nodded.

Aurore rolled her eyes.

"Okay, I understand. I will not confront Madame Pualis until the most crucial moment. When Madame Pualis noticed that the alarm had been triggered and attempted to leave, I did not stop her. I merely expressed reluctance and conversed with her for an additional minute. Right, please elaborate on the specifics of your exploration."

She seated herself at the dining table and listened intently, just in case Madame Pualis were to interrogate her in anger.

Lumian pulled out a chair on the opposite side of the dining table and expounded on the expedition's accomplishments and battle process.

As Aurore listened, her expression gradually became somewhat peculiar.

"What is the matter?" Lumian noticed his sister's abnormality.

After considerable deliberation, Aurore inquired with a strange expression, "There is a portrait of a man in Madame Pualis' bedroom, and he resembles her. It's suspected that he is her brother?"

"Yes, the three foreigners speculated that he might be a missing

member of the Roquefort family named Pulitt," Lumian recounted Ryan and the others' statements, including Dandyism and the vast number of illegitimate children.
He added, "According to the three foreigners' investigation, there is no such person as Pualis in the Roquefort family."
Aurore nodded and exhaled.
"Then I am quite sure that my guess is correct."
Her expression remained peculiar, only growing more pronounced.
"What guess?" Lumian asked, perplexed.
Aurore gave him a sidelong glance before replying, "Perhaps Madame Pualis is actually Pulitt."
"What? That's absurd!" Lumian exclaimed. "One is a man, the other a woman, and Madame Pualis had two children!"
"Who's to say she gave birth to them herself? Maybe the administrator did it for her," Aurore countered, a sneer curling her lip. "And even if they are Madame Pualis's children, it doesn't necessarily mean anything. In the world of mysticism, anything is possible. Consider this: if Louis Lund can give birth to a man, then why can't Pulitt become a woman?"
"That may be true, but..." Lumian was still unconvinced.
Aurore gave him a sly smile.
"The reason I dare to make such a guess, unlike the three foreigners, is because I've heard something. Or rather, I've witnessed something."
"Do you remember which pathway neighbors the Hunter pathway?"
"Assassin," Lumian replied without hesitation.
He had been drawn to the name, which was undoubtedly cooler than Hunter.
"In our organization, uh—the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, there was a man who was fascinated by the idea of an Assassin and chose that pathway," Aurore explained, her expression growing stranger by the moment. "At a gathering, he confided in us with a melancholy and troubled air that the potion an Assassin needs to consume after reaching Sequence 7 is called Witch."
"Witch?" Lumian had a sinking feeling the moment he heard the potion's name.
"Yes, Witch. In the world of mysticism, Warlocks and Witches are two entirely different concepts. You used to get them mixed up and call me a Witch from time to time. It was rather unsettling," Aurore said, taking the opportunity to enlighten him. "Drinking the Witch potion will turn you into a Witch. Acting as a Witch causes your body to undergo a complete transformation, turning you into

a woman."
Hiss... Lumian took a deep breath, relieved that his first obtained characteristic was that of a Hunter.
Had he obtained something related to the Assassin pathway, he might very well have been lost to it due to his eagerness.
"What happened to the man who was considering it? Did he drink it?" Lumian asked, unable to resist.
Aurore replied with a smile, "He agonized over it for a long time. He didn't want to become a woman, but he also didn't want to stay at Sequence 8. Eventually, someone persuaded him, 'Life is short, why not give it a try?'"
"After that, I met him again at a gathering. No, he was already a her by then. She was already a woman by then. A beautiful and charming one at that."
"..." Lumian was momentarily speechless.
Aurore grinned at him and added, clearly enjoying herself, "In the future, should you reach Sequence 5 and find yourself unable to obtain the Sequence 4 materials for the Hunter pathway, you might consider the Demoness pathway instead. The Assassin pathway is also known as the Demoness pathway..."
Demoness... Lumian found the name "Assassin" bewildering.
The mysticism world was fraught with dangers!
He deftly steered the conversation back on track.
"So Madame Pualis is truly Pulitt the casanova."
Even an Assassin could transform into a Demoness. A path that enabled a man to bear children was likely to transform a man into a woman.
Aurore nodded warily and gazed out of the window.
"I suspect that Madame Pualis transitioned to a woman only after reaching a specific Sequence. She had to disappear to avoid discovery by the authorities. According to the mysterious lady, the power of a deity's boon can also be divided into Sequences.
"Her abnormal pathway would also include the ability to promote fertility, manipulate life, and control the undead."
Aurore deduced that she could manipulate life and control the undead from Lumian's battle with the midwife.
That was the same performance Madame Night, who looked like Madame Pualis, had showcased in Paramita with the undead chasing after her.
Aurore suddenly exclaimed.
"What's the matter?" Lumian asked cautiously.
Did his sister uncover another ominous truth?
Aurore scowled at her brother and replied, "At the afternoon tea, Madame Pualis said that love is unfathomable. She wished he

would perish for his mistake, but when he faced death, she saved him and refused to tell the other party.
"I didn't comprehend it then, and I didn't dwell on it. Now, I wonder if she had an ulterior motive for saying that."
Lumian was equally puzzled.
"She saved someone? When did she do that..."
Suddenly, he halted and stared at Aurore.
The siblings remembered that Madame Night had saved them by distracting the undead in Paramita.
"But that was from the preceding cycle..." Lumian was about to reject it, but he couldn't.
He and Aurore exchanged a look and realized their eyes were filled with shock and dread.
If Madame Pualis was referring to that incident, it meant she retained some of her memories from the loop.
"It's impossible..." Aurore muttered to herself. "Never mind. Let's assume it's true. I'd rather overestimate our foe than underestimate them."
Lumian concurred. Then, he had a thought.
"Aurore, uh, Grande Soeur, considering that Madame Pualis might have been a man, did she fall in love with you?"
"I didn't do anything wrong. You were the one who spied on Louis Lund giving birth. Pualis is infatuated with you," Aurore riposted.
Lumian muttered under his breath, "Perhaps she believes that you instigated me.
"I don't usually associate with her, but I did once bring some people to see her having an affair with the padre. She teased me for it. You, on the other hand, discuss literature and trends with her occasionally. You even go to her house to borrow a pony."
"Huh..." Aurore's voice rose in disgust, "Then why was she trying to set me up with those awful men you told me about?"
Lumian paused before responding, "Maybe she's trying to discourage your interest in men and lead you to her instead."
"What kind of strange things have you been reading?" Aurore glared at her brother.
Not only could Lumian provide a rational answer, but he did it with forceful verve.
"Your novels. You wrote something similar in one of them."
"Is that so..." Aurore fell into deep thought.
After a moment, she looked out the window and said, "It's been a while, but Madame Pualis hasn't come after us. The cycle hasn't started again..."
"Perhaps she doesn't want to kill the foreigners. If an investigator sent by the officials were to be killed, it would cause even greater

trouble," Lumian speculated. "And she doesn't suspect me, so she doesn't suspect you either."
The witness was dead, and no one else had seen him.
Aurore nodded and said self-deprecatingly, "I don't even feel like eating dinner."
Suddenly, Lumian had an idea. "What if we go to the castle?"
"Is the perpetrator returning to the scene of the crime?" Aurore laughed.
Lumian nodded.
"I want to investigate the castle. Madame Pualis doesn't suspect me, so I can go unnoticed."
"Oh, and I haven't picked any tulips yet. I can ask for a few under the guise of making fragrances."
Since Aurore and Madame Pualis appeared to be friends, there was no issue with Lumian's actions.
Aurore thought for a moment before saying, "We can try, but we can't be sure that Madame Pualis won't cause trouble.
"Yes, if you don't return in half an hour, I'll go to the edge of the village and trigger the cycle to start again."
"Alright," Lumian agreed.
.....
As Lumian arrived at the administrator's castle once again, the sun had already set behind the mountain, painting the horizon with a red hue.
Passing through the garden, Lumian reached the open main entrance and approached a male servant.
"Excuse me, my Grande Soeur Aurore is creating a fragrance. Could I please borrow some tulips from Madame Pualis?"
The male servant, dressed in a red shirt and white pants, responded without any hint of suspicion.
"I'll inquire with Madame."
He quickly disappeared into the castle. Shortly after, he reappeared.
"Madame says you may go straight to the garden to pluck them."
She really doesn't suspect me? Besides, it's as if nothing happened... Nevertheless, he refrained from entering the castle and headed towards the garden to search for the tulips.
It was there that Lumian spotted the flowers and a lady's maid pruning a flowering tree in the shadows.
As he casually sized her up, his gaze suddenly froze.
The lady's maid was in her forties, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a pretty face devoid of wrinkles. She was none other than the midwife who had fought Valentine and the others and was eventually killed by Ryan!

Yet, here she stood, seemingly unscathed, her face shrouded in a shadow cast by the flowers and trees.

Chapter 70: Spirit Channeling

The instant he laid eyes on the 'midwife,' Lumian's heart seemed to cease beating.

She's still alive?

I clearly saw her killed by Ryan, and her spirit was destroyed!

Lumian remembered vividly how the midwife had eventually been reduced to tiny pieces of flesh scattered on the ground. Some parts couldn't even be found.

This must be a freaking ghost encounter! No, wait, there's the sound of breathing! Lumian thought of some scenes from his sister's novels, and his heart went from stillness to rapid beating.

If it weren't for the 'midwife' not looking at him, preoccupied with trimming the branches of the flowering tree, he would have reacted to the stress.

Kacha, kacha. Tiny tree branches that grew haphazardly fell to the ground, snapping the stunned Lumian out of his daze.

He subconsciously took a step forward, walking towards the place where the tulips bloomed.

The 'midwife' didn't stop him or even turn around.

Lumian couldn't help but steal another glance at her. She was focused on pruning the branches. The shadows cast by the flowers and trees made her profile look dark and gloomy.

Not daring to linger, Lumian plucked a few tulips and left the administrator's castle.

His heart was still pounding even when he returned to the village.

After calming himself down, Lumian walked towards Reimund Greg's house. It was still too early for Aurore to trigger the cycle.

It was also a two-story building, but compared to Lumian and Aurore's house, it was clearly older, more dilapidated, and narrower. The outer wall revealed the gray color of stone amidst the many green plants creeping over it.

At that moment, the Gregs' door was wide open, allowing one to see the stove on the left, the table on the right, and the wooden buckets behind.

Lumian recalled that the wooden barrels were used for storage. There were two simple wooden beds in the space they isolated. They belonged to Reimund and his sister.

Lumian didn't knock and walked straight into the Gregs' house as usual.

Reimund's elder and younger sisters were helping their mother prepare dinner. Reimund's father, Pierre Greg, was sitting on a chair at the wooden table, drinking cheap wine with a gloomy expression.

"I heard that Reimund is missing?" Lumian asked Pierre Greg with a concerned look.
Pierre Greg seemed to have aged significantly, and the few wrinkles on his face were even more pronounced.
He looked up at Lumian and asked in confusion and surprise, "You don't know?"
At this moment, Reimund's mother and two sisters stopped what they were doing and turned to look at Lumian.
Lumian couldn't be any more honest.
"I've been busy with my own matters. I haven't seen Reimund for days."
Pierre Greg had already inquired and knew that Lumian was telling the truth. Otherwise, suspecting that this rascal had instigated Reimund to run away from home, he would have gone questioning him that afternoon.
"Two afternoons ago—they said it was the 29th—Reimund didn't return after he left," Pierre Gregg said with a gloomy expression. "We've been looking for him. His two brothers are still out searching. Where do you think he'd have gone?"
Lumian hesitated before responding, "He usually says that he doesn't want to learn shepherding, but he doesn't have much money on him. It's impossible for him to leave on his own. Let me see if he left anything behind..."
As he spoke, he walked naturally to the wooden barrels at the back of the first floor and passed through them to reach Reimund's bed.
The bed was very simple, as if pieced together with a few planks of wood. However, the grayish-blue bedsheets, the pillow stuffed with straw, and the quilt with traces of mending were all clean. It was evident that they were often washed.
This was because Aurore loved cleanliness and didn't allow lice to appear at home or on her body. Even Lumian had developed this habit. Therefore, when he interacted with his playmates, he would consciously urge them to maintain personal hygiene. He didn't allow those fellows to be dirty and live with lice and fleas all day.
If Reimund and the others slacked off at some point and were discovered by him to have lice, they would definitely be pranked. They might even be pushed into the river and made to wash up even if they refused to.
After a few years of "oppression," Reimund habitually helped clean up the environment when he returned home.
"We didn't find any message," Pierre Gregg said with a worried expression as he followed him to the bed.
Lumian sat by Reimund's bed and reached under the pillow.
He found two items—a cracked, dark-red fountain pen and an

exercise book filled with handwriting.
Reimund was hungry for knowledge, but had little chance to receive an education.
In Emperor Roselle's time, villages like Cordu had mandatory township schools, housed in the same building as the administrator's office. The building also contained an army recruitment center, a recruit physical examination committee, and other institutions, but ultimately, there were only a few staff members.
In recent decades, many villages had lost their schools. The Church provided Sunday school for larger populations, but Cordu had to rely on educated elders to teach the children sporadically. Over time, some young people became illiterate again.
When Lumian was in a good mood, he would claim he needed money for drinks. So, he sold his old fountain pens and workbooks to Reimund, Ava, and others at a low price, teaching them some words in the process.
Reimund took every lesson as seriously as he did combat training and helping shepherds make cheese in the mountains to earn money.
He was determined to change his fate.
Lumian removed the fountain pen and exercise book, staring at them for a long time.
"I asked the padre. He said these are just simple words that don't form a sentence." Pierre Gregg sighed.
Lumian flipped through the exercise book, noting how the handwriting had improved from messy and ugly to something acceptable.
"True, there's no message." He agreed with Pierre Gregg before adding, "But I wonder if it's a code that can be deciphered into a sentence. You've heard a similar story, right? Aurore told it to many village children. Did they mention it at home?"
This included Reimund's younger brother and sister.
"Yes, they did." Pierre Gregg nodded.
Cordu villagers would often gather in the kitchen at night for conversation, laughter, and storytelling when they couldn't afford the tavern. First-time guests had to follow Intis social norms and bring a bottle of wine, even a cheap one.
Pierre Gregg had heard a similar story from his youngest son during such a gathering.
Lumian held up the exercise book confidently.
"I'll take it back to Aurore for her to examine and see if she can find anything."
"Alright," Pierre Gregg didn't think it was anything valuable.

After leaving the area surrounded by wooden barrels, Lumian walked toward the door, and Pierre Gregg sat down again.
A few steps later, Lumian heard Pierre Gregg sigh and mutter,"If he didn't want to learn shepherding, he could've told me. Why did he just leave... Our family will soon be wealthy. He won't need to learn shepherding anymore..."
Wealthy? Lumian's heart raced as he turned around, feigning curiosity.
"What's this chance for wealth?"
Pierre Gregg didn't look up, keeping his head lowered as he said despondently,
"Our family's horoscope is about to change. Our luck will improve..."
What— Lumian felt a chill down his spine.
"Who told you this?" he asked.
Pierre Gregg didn't answer, continuing to lament.
.....
Upon returning home, Lumian immediately informed his sister that the 'midwife' was still alive.
Aurore frowned her blonde brows. "She's not necessarily a living person."
"Huh?" Lumian was taken aback.
Aurore pondered and said, "Didn't we discuss this before? Madame Pualis' pathway might have the power to control the undead. That might be a zombie."
"Impossible," Lumian said. "I saw her without activating my Spirit Vision. Besides, there were no signs of stitching on her body. Back then, she was diced into many small pieces by Ryan." Lumian recalled and said, "Also, I heard her breathing!"
At this point, Lumian paused.
"However, she was indeed a little sluggish. Her expression was gloomy, and her eyes weren't lively enough. She looked almost exactly like Naroka! The one I saw on the night of the previous, previous loop when Naroka took the initiative to enter Paramita!"
Naroka, whose face was pale and eyes were blank.
Of course, the 'midwife' obviously resembled a living person more.
Aurore nodded and said, "A special state that's closer to the undead?"
Unable to deduce an answer, she gestured for Lumian to say something else.
Lumian recounted everything that had happened in Reimund's father's words in detail, as if nothing had happened in the castle.
Aurore listened quietly and nodded.
"Madame Pualis doesn't seem to want to pursue the matter of the

castle. I wonder what she's holding back...
"Also, your discovery proves that a portion of the abnormality in the village is related to her, but she doesn't seem to be involved in the cycle..."
What she meant was that Madame Pualis's involvement in the abnormality was mainly the fertility, death, soul, and Paramita. Nothing to do with the time loop.
"I think so too." Lumian had such an inkling during his explorations. "It seems that the person behind the padre and company is most likely not Madame Pualis."
Referring to Reimund's father's words, he guessed,
"The one who spread the news that doing something can affect the horoscope and obtain good luck?"
Aurore acknowledged tersely.
"We'll investigate tomorrow and see if we can channel Reimund's spirit tonight."
.....
After dinner, Aurore saw that it was about time and began to set up the altar.
She was praying to herself, so she only placed a single candle, but the candle was replaced by another one made of slumber flowers and other materials.
Aurore sanctified a silver dagger and created a wall of spirituality. Then, she dripped the extract made of night vanilla and moon flowers onto the orange flames, stirring up a misty fog.
Seeing that the preparations were complete, Aurore glanced at the workbook on the altar and took a step back. She said in ancient Hermes, "I!"
As she uttered the word, her eyes darkened, as if an invisible wind was swirling around her.
"I summon in my name:"
This was the second sentence she said, and she changed it to Hermes.
As she didn't know where Reimund's spirit was, she couldn't directly communicate with it. She could only try summoning it. As a wild Beyonder, she didn't dare pray to the Evernight Goddess, who was in charge of this domain. She could only rely on herself. The chances of success weren't high, unless Reimund's spirit was indeed somewhere in Cordu and was very close.
Aurore continued to recite, "The spirit lingering in Cordu Village.
"The man named Reimund Greg.
"The owner of this exercise book..."
The orange candle flame suddenly swayed, absorbing the surrounding fog and becoming slightly larger.

Its light rippled and was dyed with a deep blue color.
Beads of sweat appeared on Aurore's forehead as she began to borrow strength from various materials.
Amidst the howling wind, a figure appeared above the blue flames.
Having already activated his Spirit Vision, Lumian saw a translucent figure. He had brown hair and eyes, looking rather ordinary. It was Reimund Greg.
He was indeed still in the village.
Reimund's body was bloated, his face pale, and blood-colored tears were dripping from the corners of his eyes.
Wh— Aurore was clearly stunned.
After the cycle was restarted, Reimund had only gone missing and hadn't drowned. *How did his spirit end up like this?*
That's right. If he hadn't drowned, how could he have become a spirit?
They were self-contradictory...
Amidst her confusion, Aurore asked, "Reimund Greg, why did you disappear?"
Reimund's expression suddenly turned ferocious as he shouted sharply, "They drowned me!"

Chapter 71: Underground

They? Lumian couldn't hide his surprise at Reimund's response.

He had assumed that Reimund had drowned in the river of his 'own accord,' becoming a sacrifice to some unknown entity. But now, it seemed there were others involved. It wasn't just an unseen force that had pulled Reimund into the depths.

"Who are they?" Aurore demanded.

Reimund's face contorted with pain and fury. His eyes burned with hatred. He spat the words, "Pons Bénet, Pons Bénet and his men!

"They held me down in the water!"

After Ava and the others had left the riverbank, Pons Bénet and his thugs appeared where Reimund had washed ashore. They forced him back into the water, drowning him to turn him into a sacrifice? Lumian pieced together the scenario from Reimund's words.

The entire Lent celebration had been twisted into a dark, sacrificial ritual!

Aurore pressed for more information, but Reimund only repeated the same few phrases, as if they were all that remained of his memory.

Damn, we missed the best time for spirit channeling. All we have left is this lingering obsession... Aurore thought for a moment, formulating a question that Reimund might or might not recall.

"Did they sacrifice you to a specific being?

"What's so special about Him? Where is He?"

This time, Aurore was more cautious. She didn't ask for the full name, only seeking indirect information to aid her judgment.

She believed that if Reimund's spirit had sensed anything during the sacrifice, it would have left a strong impression. Otherwise, it wouldn't.

Reimund hesitated, tears welling up in his ghostly eyes, turning the corners red.

Lumian's expression darkened. Unconsciously, he began clenching his fists.

Suddenly, Reimund cried out, "Underground! Beneath the cathedral!"

What? Aurore could hardly believe her ears.

Based on her question, Reimund was implying that the secret entity he had been sacrificed to resided beneath the cathedral!

That's impossible. It's the Fifth Epoch. *How can a god walk the land?* Aurore composed herself, considering that Reimund's spirit retained only a fragment of his obsession and some spirituality. His answers were disjointed and fixated on certain points. In other

words, his testimony might not actually confirm the being's location beneath the cathedral. It could simply be a reaction to her prompting.
But regardless of whether Reimund's answer was true or a reflection of his obsession, something was amiss beneath the cathedral. It held the key to the sacrificial ritual!
Aurore could only hope that the secrets hidden there wouldn't prove too horrifying or outlandish.
She tried asking about other matters, but Reimund's spirit could only repeat phrases like "they drowned me," "Pons Bénet," and "beneath the cathedral."
Seeing no further gains, Aurore ended the spirit channeling and watched as Reimund's form vanished above the candle flame. The blue hue that had stained the altar swiftly receded.
After dispelling the wall of spirituality, she noticed Lumian lost in thought, silent.
"Wh-what are you thinking about?" Aurore waved her hand in front of her brother's eyes.
The corners of Lumian's mouth curled up as he forced a smile.
"I regret not hitting Pons Bénet harder yesterday."
He had kneed Pons Bénet, causing him considerable pain, but he had held back, not wanting to escalate the conflict with the padre and his allies before the twelfth night. He had rationally restrained himself, not crippling Pons Bénet outright.
"There'll be a chance," Aurore reassured him.
Lumian nodded and chuckled.
"Actually, we've been overlooking something. Before Lent, we're not the only ones afraid of escalating the conflict. The padre and his goons are too. They're not ready, and they haven't started the ritual."
In other words, if Lumian had truly wanted Pons Bénet to suffer irreversible harm, the padre would likely only feign retribution and avoid any real action.
They would bide their time until Lent. Regardless of whether Lumian had offended them or not, once the Lent celebration "began," everyone in the village would be in their sights.
Aurore understood Lumian's point and nodded slightly.
"You can decide how to exact revenge on Pons Bénet.
"What we need to focus on now is how we can survive until the twelfth night after the padre and his cronies gain immense power during Lent."
Lumian immediately sank into deep contemplation.
Aurore shared her thoughts.
"We have two options. We either join forces with the three

foreigners, or we find a way to strengthen ourselves."
She hesitated for a moment before continuing, "If we can confirm that Madame Pualis has no connection to the loop and is trapped here like us, we might even cooperate with her."
"Huh?" Lumian was taken aback.
Madame Pualis was a terrifying and malevolent Beyonder!
Aurore sighed and said, "A philosopher from my homeland once said that balance is needed between principal and secondary contradictions. We must unite all possible forces.
"Yes, there's definitely something off about the cathedral's underground. It might hold crucial clues. We have to investigate it before Lent, as we may not get another opportunity."
From Aurore's knowledge, most of the cathedrals in this world had underground chambers. Some stored Sealed Artifacts, while others served as burial sites for important figures. Although Cordu's cathedral didn't contain Sealed Artifacts or notable people to be buried, it still featured a large basement when constructed.
"Alright," Lumian agreed. "I'll talk to the three foreigners tomorrow."
He then brought up Reimund's condition.
"Why can he only say those few words? Was the spirit not summoned properly?"
Aurore sighed again.
"There's a critical period for mediumship. Within an hour of death.
"After an hour, the spirit of the deceased rapidly dissipates, losing their original memories. All that remains are some thoughts, emotions, and images they can't let go. In the technical terms of our homeland, it's called obsession."
Lumian nodded slightly.
"When the next cycle starts, we'll summon Reimund from the beginning. Does that count as an hour of death?
"But wait; why does Reimund remember the last, last cycle?"
Only then did he recognize the issue. After the cycle reset, shouldn't Reimund forget about drowning?
Aurore was stumped. Combining her thoughts from the ritual, she pondered and said, "I believe it counts. It's not Lent yet. According to the timeline, Reimund hasn't drowned, so he shouldn't know the murderer's identity. However, because he lost his body, he can only exist as a spirit. It's similar to death. There will be lingering obsessions. Thus, the person we summoned just now remembers certain events from the previous, previous cycle.
"In simpler terms, Reimund's state has become unique due to his body's loss. He retains a certain amount of memories when the cycle resets!

"Heh, it's like a glitch."
The loop created a tiny error because Reimund's body was sacrificed? Lumian roughly understood his sister's explanation.
Aurore chuckled and added, "It seems that the power allowing us to loop is very mechanical and rigid. It probably isn't under the original owner's control and operates autonomously. Otherwise, it could easily target Reimund's spirit."
At this point, she appeared to relax somewhat.
"Haha, in that case, we still have a chance to break the cycle."
Influenced by his sister's emotions, Lumian's somber mood lifted slightly.
After all their efforts, they finally saw a glimmer of hope.
The two of them cleaned up the altar and moved to the second-floor study. Aurore taught Lumian Hermes and ancient Hermes, word by word, based on the disordered and incorrect ritual he had written.
Lumian had already learned some words, so his progress was promising.
Under the bright electric lamp, Aurore explained the pronunciation and structure of the words to her brother. While he revised, she used musk, cloves, blood, and other materials to create candles.
As Lumian studied intently, he occasionally glanced at his sister working beside him, feeling as if he had returned to their warm life—free from loops or malevolent gods.
Outside the window, the night was tranquil.
.....
Lumian woke up to find himself in his misty room.
As he got out of bed, he walked over to the table and grabbed a pen and paper. He then wrote down the ancient Hermes and Hermes words, but in the wrong order. He then corrected them by labeling each with a number.
After finishing, Lumian let out a sigh of relief and looked over to the table.
There were four items there, the two grayish-white musk candles made by Aurore (one with Lumian's blood, and the other without), the bottle of gray amber perfume, the metal bottle containing tulip powder, and the silver dagger provided by Aurore.
That lady really sent them in... Lumian's heart calmed down when he saw the items.
Lumian grabbed the items and looked for Aurore's homemade incense. When he found it, he went downstairs and placed everything on the dining table. Then, he went to the kitchen to grab a glass of water and a pile of coarse salt.
The materials for the ritual were now prepared.

Before falling asleep, Aurore was worried that Lumian didn't have the corresponding symbol to pray for the boon. This would prevent him from burning the items on the replica goatskin to inform the target deity of his desires. However, since the mysterious lady didn't mention it, there was probably no need for it. After all, it was essentially praying to the power in Lumian's body. It could 'hear' all the prayers without any additional 'paperwork.'

Lumian took a deep breath and slowly exhaled as he looked at the items on the dining table.

Without wasting a moment, Lumian placed one of the grayish-white musk candles, the one with his own blood, at the top of the altar, representing the deity. He placed the other candle in front of him.

Following the order of god before man, Lumian lit the candle by sparking his spirituality. He wasn't an expert at sanctifying the ritual's silver dagger or creating a wall of spirituality.

As Lumian's spirituality flowed out from the tip of the silver dagger and connected with the air around him, he felt a mystical sensation that he couldn't explain.

Soon, the wall of spirituality was complete, and Lumian's own spirituality was significantly depleted.

He cleared his mind using Aurore's homemade incense and Cogitation, allowing him to enter a state where he could perform the ritualistic magic.

With a sizzling sound, Lumian dripped the gray amber perfume and tulip powder onto the candle that represented the deity. A strange fragrance filled the air, and Lumian felt a magical energy pulsing around him.

Lumian took a step back, glancing at the small notebook beside the altar. He looked at the burning candle and shouted in ancient Hermes, "Power of Inevitability!"

Chapter 72: Sacrificial Dance

"Power of Inevitability!"

As Lumian uttered the words in ancient Hermes, the light above the altar dimmed ominously. The orange candle flame flickered wildly, as if buffeted by an unseen wind, compressing to the size of a peppercorn.

Simultaneously, heat bloomed in his chest, and his head spun. His ears buzzed, as if once again on the verge of hearing that terrifying voice emanating from an infinite distance, yet remaining unnervingly close.

Lumian steadied himself and had a sudden realization.

The corruption within him had been sealed by the master of the bluish-black symbol. Even if he delved into deep Cogitation, he could only summon the thorn symbol and release a meager aura. He couldn't harness its true power.

Could this ritual bypass the seal and absorb the boon?

Only if the owner of the bluish-black symbol, that great existence, had tacitly granted permission!

Remembering the enigmatic lady's self-assured demeanor, Lumian felt a surge of confidence. He even suspected that the ritual itself contained a component for seeking the great presence's approval.

As for which part, his knowledge of mysticism was too limited to speculate.

In the throes of the ritual, Lumian dared not delay. With a focused mind, he began reciting the subsequent incantations in ancient Hermes.

"You are the past, the present, and the future;

"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."

These words resonated within the sealed altar. The floor and artifacts seemed to writhe, as if innumerable bizarre entities were about to burst forth and invade the dream ruins.

Ooo!

A black wind materialized out of nowhere, encircling Lumian. The candle flame, previously shrunk to a peppercorn size, swelled, suffused with a silvery hue and a touch of black.

Lumian heard the voice that had always pushed him to the brink of death once more. But at some point, a faint gray fog had emerged from the altar, coalescing around him.

The sensation left him suspended between deep Cogitation and witnessing the Noodle Man's dance. He wasn't on the edge of death, but he wasn't comfortable either. It felt like severe tinnitus—dizzy, nauseous, and agitated to a degree, his mind a swirling mess.

Barely maintaining control, Lumian continued the ritual.
"I implore you,
"I beseech your benediction.
"I plead with you to grant me the power of Dancer.
"Tulip, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation!
"Gray amber, a herb that belongs to inevitability, please pass your powers to my incantation!"
As the ritual progressed, Lumian's tinnitus and dizziness intensified. It felt as if countless maggots writhed beneath his skin.
Finally, he completed the incantation.
Almost instantaneously, the silver-black candle flame condensed, transforming into a pillar of light that illuminated his left pectoral.
Silver-black phantom liquid poured forth, swiftly enveloping Lumian, rendering him sinister and fearsome.
It felt as if his skin was pierced by a thousand needles, his muscles and ligaments torn asunder. The mysterious voice became deafening, reverberating within his mind.
Lumian was consumed by excruciating pain, his mind teetering on the edge of madness.
His blood vessels seared as if incinerated from within.
This torment far exceeded the near-death state induced by deep Cogitation.
All he could do was clench his teeth and endure, desperately clinging to his fraying sanity. As for everything else, it didn't matter.
Amid the tempestuous onslaught, he was adrift. Time became an enigma.
At last, the agonizing pain abated. Lumian felt as if he had been unburdened or had emerged from drowning, a sudden sense of relief washing over him.
He swiftly collected his thoughts and looked up.
The candle flame had returned to its original size, but retained its silver and black hues.
Regaining his senses, Lumian took two hasty steps forward and snuffed out the candle representing him to avert any mishaps.
Next was the candle symbolizing the deity.
He meticulously followed the procedure, completing the ritual step by step. As he dissolved the wall of spirituality, he felt mentally drained and his body sore, as if he had battled a formidable beast.
Before long, the dining table was cleared. Lumian began to assess his condition and discovered a wealth of knowledge had

materialized in his mind.
There were three primary parts to this:
First, it involved harnessing the power of dance, rhythm, and spirituality to tap into the forces of nature and communicate with unknown entities. This was the essence of being a Dancer. With this knowledge, Lumian could not only beseech Inevitability but also craft new sacrificial dances tailored to various situations, in order to "appease" other beings.
The second and third parts were applications of the first.
What Lumian desired most was the enigmatic dance performed by Noodle Man. The knowledge was directly implanted into his mind, enabling him to comprehend it instantly; all that remained was to practice.
With this arcane sacrificial dance, Lumian could activate the black thorn symbol on his chest while exploring the dream ruins, suppressing or weakening the formidable monsters therein.
The third segment involved another bizarre dance. It didn't resemble a traditional sacrificial rite but rather a blend of sacrifice and summoning.
By executing this dance, Lumian could attract nearby objects, and at the cost of his own blood, bond one of them to himself, thereby gaining access to one of its abilities or traits.
Of course, Lumian would first need to endure such possession. Some attachments could inflict significant adverse effects on humans, while others might prove reluctant to depart, creating complications.
Lumian felt it was crucial to understand the summoned entities fully. It would be far too hazardous to experiment without anticipating potential issues.
The value of mystical knowledge was apparent in such a situation. Lumian desperately required resources like Mysterious Creatures Illustrated or Spirit World Creatures Illustrated, but even a Warlock, renowned for their extensive knowledge, could not possess such information.
Moments later, Lumian stretched and discovered that his flexibility had indeed improved dramatically.
Although not quite on par with Noodle Man, a mutated monster with reassembled organs, he now surpassed nearly all ordinary humans, enabling him to execute the enigmatic sacrificial dance.
Lumian effortlessly kicked backward, touching the back of his head, and nodded contentedly, murmuring, That's right. I can perform many actions that were once impossible. My Hunter combat skills have also greatly improved.
Lumian practiced the mysterious dance to familiarize his body

with the corresponding movements, aiming to reduce the time needed to complete the routine.
Sometimes his movements were forceful and resonant, as if in combat, while other times they were gentle and unhurried, as if conveying a message, yet always rhythmic.
As Lumian danced, his spiritual energy radiated outward, merging with the ambient natural forces.
Gradually, his thoughts concentrated, his mind quieted, and he entered a transcendent, mystical state.
This allowed him to perceive various subtle phenomena surrounding him, as if his Spirit Vision had been activated.
Simultaneously, he seemed to connect with the unseen power within him.
His chest warmed once more, and a faint, horrifying voice echoed, but without consequence.
Phew... Lumian ceased dancing, unfastened his clothing, and inspected his chest.
The black thorn symbol reemerged, accompanied by the bluish-black one.
Lumian's thoughts briefly scattered but quickly returned to normal. He had achieved the desired effect perfectly.
He then calculated the precise duration from the emergence of the black thorn symbol to its disappearance.
It lasted approximately one minute.
Lumian fastened his clothes and prepared to try the other bizarre dance.
It was crazy and warped, and he couldn't describe it properly.
As he danced, his spirituality spread out again, blending with the natural forces surrounding him.
In the last third of the dance, he sensed something strange approaching.
Three figures appeared on the first-floor window, but they were blurry and transparent. Lumian recognized them as the skinless monster, the shotgun monster, and the mouth orifice monster with the black mark.
He muttered in amusement, *Is this a victims' complaints meeting?*
Lumian could make one of the monsters attach to him and borrow their abilities by taking out a ritual silver dagger and making a cut on his body to release some blood.
He craved the mouth orifice monster's "invisibility" but resisted the urge—lest something happened via allowing a monster he murdered to possess him—and finished the dance.
As Lumian danced the last few moves, he heard weak and soft voices.

It sounded like many people communicating, but it was unclear where the voices came from.
Lumian analyzed it and realized the voices seemed to come from his body, from the corruption that had been sealed.
After the last move, Lumian stood there and muttered to himself, *What did I hear?*
Lumian was only semi-literate in the field of mysticism and couldn't identify the source of the soft sounds he heard. He had no choice but to give up, as it wasn't more terrifying than the corruption itself.
After the sounds subsided and him finishing the two mysterious dances, Lumian confirmed that the Dancer had enhanced his spirituality. Although he knew he was most likely inferior to Sequence 9s who excelled in spirituality, he had escaped the shackles of being a Hunter. He felt he was above average.
My shortcomings have been compensated for. Lumian was very happy about this.
Lumian didn't dwell on what would happen to his body after enduring the Dancer's power and the corresponding corruption. He couldn't stop it, so he decided not to think about it. He rubbed his tired head and made up his mind to rest for the night, returning to the real world to wait for the owl!

Chapter 73: Tracking

Lumian's eyes snapped open, his aches gone and his spirituality restored.

He sprang up, strode to the window, and yanked the curtains aside.

Dawn had yet to break. The blood-red moon sank in the west while stars speckled the sky. On a nearby elm, the large owl with piercing eyes reappeared, gazing down at Lumian.

Instead of alarm or anger, Lumian flashed a dazzling smile.

"You're back," he said, almost too eagerly. His mannerisms, his tone, even his facial expression—it all made the target want to punch him.

The owl stared for a few seconds before spreading its wings and vanishing into the darkness.

Almost simultaneously, Aurore emerged from her bedroom, turned the handle, and entered Lumian's room.

"How'd it go?" Lumian asked immediately.

Aurore nodded.

"White Paper is on it."

Her once light-blue eyes had darkened, and the trees in them grew larger as they receded.

She produced a mercury-plated mirror and set it on Lumian's table. Using pale-white powder, she cast a spell that showed him what she was seeing.

Lumian glimpsed the owl's silhouette. It circled Cordu at a low altitude, as if trying to shake off any pursuers. But White Paper, a creature from the spirit world, was swift and unfazed, maintaining a constant distance.

After a minute or two, the owl reached the village square.

Without hesitation, it dove into the cemetery beside the cathedral.

Why is it here again? Lumian sighed inwardly.

The last time the siblings spied on Michel Garrigue, the "lizard" that crawled from the deputy padre's mouth also wound up in the cemetery, slipping in and out of various graves!

Lumian glanced at his sister. "You don't think it's like in stories, where the cemetery doubles as a villain's lair or hideout, do you?"

Aurore scoffed. "You know life inspires art, right?"

"I suppose..." Lumian conceded, accepting the professional author's explanation.

At that moment, the owl landed on an unremarkable grave.

Like most graves in Intis, it featured a deep pit filled with a coffin and covered with soil. One or two stone slabs lay atop it, and a tombstone marked its head.

This was Lumian's guess, at least; from the outside, the grave seemed ordinary.
The owl settled on the slabs sealing the grave.
With White Paper's aid, Aurore and Lumian uncovered suspicious traces.
The tombstone was blank. The stone slab, which should have been dirty and overgrown, was clean, as if regularly tended.
"Something's off about this grave," Aurore remarked.
As she spoke, the slabs sealing the grave fell.
No, not fell—opened.
Inward, like a door, revealing darkness and stone stairs descending deeper.
"Wow," Lumian marveled. "It's huge!"
Not the average grave he'd pictured, but more like a spacious mausoleum.
Cordu has such a place... Aurore had thought six years in town taught her everything about Cordu, but it was growing stranger by the day.
As the siblings talked, the owl swooped into the depths of the mausoleum.
The underground space was no exaggeration. As White Paper followed, it entered a tomb chamber.
About the size of Lumian's kitchen, the chamber held a black coffin at its center.
The coffin wasn't closed. The lid leaned against the side, resting on the ground.
The owl flew over and perched on the coffin's edge.
"The dead Warlock?" Lumian tensed.
Aurore tersely agreed and instructed White Paper to approach the coffin and peer inside.
Almost simultaneously, Lumian spotted a figure lurking in a corner of the tomb.
Before he could tell his sister to check it out, White Paper's gaze fell into the open coffin.
With a bang, the mercury mirror before them shattered, and Aurore let out a pained, muffled cry.
Lumian spun to face his sister, only to find her eyes squeezed shut. Blood-streaked tears traced her cheeks, and her facial muscles spasmed as if they might split.
Without waiting for the semi-illiterate mysticism student to react, Aurore retrieved a short incense stick from a hidden pocket and lit it with a match.
A subtle scent wafted, distant and faint, soothing the body and mind.

Aurore's facial distortion eased. Finally, she exhaled and wiped her tears with a handkerchief.
"Are you okay?" Lumian asked, concerned.
Aurore's eyes remained closed.
"It's not serious. I'll recover after some sleep. Luckily, White Paper is weak. Sometimes, weakness is an advantage!"
She rejoiced.
"Huh?" Lumian didn't understand.
Aurore laughed at herself.
"In short, I saw something I shouldn't have, but White Paper was too weak to handle it. It caught only a fleeting glimpse before suffering severe injuries that forced it to retreat into the spirit world. The impact on me lessened significantly as well. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been so easy to keep things under control. It could have been quite problematic."
The world of mysticism is perilous... Lumian truly grasped the meaning of not seeing what one shouldn't.
He waited for his sister to recover slightly before asking, "What did White Paper see? Why was it so harmful?"
"I saw a silver-black speck of light." Aurore didn't dare to remember. "As for things that can cause damage just by looking at them, there are countless possibilities. Perhaps it's an object that reveals godhood, or a High-Sequence Beyonder's Mythical Creature form, or something laden with curses and malice..."
"Mythical Creature form?" Lumian had never encountered this term before.
Aurore casually elucidated, "The essence of the divine pathway is to transform Beyonders into deities. At Sequence 4, we can assume our own Mythical Creature form, albeit incomplete. For those below Sequence 4, merely witnessing this form can inflict harm. They might even lose control."
Saints are that formidable? They're worlds apart from Beyonders below Sequence 4... No wonder they're deemed demigods at Sequence 4... Lumian instantly recognized his own ignorance. He had naively believed that the demigod title was basically no different from lower-ranked Beyonders.
He then said, "Aurore, when White Paper neared the coffin, I think I saw a figure in a corner of the tomb, but I couldn't make out who it was, what they looked like, or what they wore."
"Another person was there?" Aurore was taken aback.
Lumian nodded.
"So, is the one inside the coffin the deceased Warlock or the one in the corner?"
"I think it's the one in the coffin." Aurore, eyes still closed,

pondered before continuing, "The one in the corner is either his puppet or subordinate, or another Beyonder. They control the Warlock's corpse."
Lumian tersely acknowledged her words.
"This means the Warlock issue hasn't been fully resolved. Perhaps this is the root cause slowly corrupting Cordu."
This discovery left him both elated and frustrated.
He was pleased that their investigation had advanced significantly, but disheartened that merely glimpsing the Warlock's corpse could injure them. Losing control was a high probability. How could they return to the tomb for further confirmation and pursue additional actions?
Aurore also considered this.
"Let's not visit the tomb for now. We'll concentrate on the area beneath the cathedral. Maybe we can uncover vital clues there to help us resolve the tomb situation."
"Alright." Lumian had previously planned to discuss exploring the cathedral's underground with the three foreigners at dawn.
In response, Aurore added, "If I fully recover, I'll accompany you to the cathedral."
Lumian hesitated for two seconds before consenting.
At this point, they needed to marshal all their strength to find hope!
With her eyes still closed, Aurore asked, "Your ritual appears to have succeeded. How do you feel?"
Lumian recounted the entire ritual process and his gains, but omitted the precise description of the being.
"I nearly lost control when I received the boon. It stabilized afterward, and my body underwent no abnormal changes. Perhaps it's because my Sequence is low enough."
Aurore smiled, eyes still closed.
"The dance that summons abnormal creatures around and allows one to be possessed by them is quite intriguing.
"It reminds me of a legendary ability from our homeland, the Spiritual Boxer!"
"Huh?" Lumian couldn't comprehend.
Aurore laughed and replied, "It entails requesting partial possession from demigod-level creatures to utilize their combat prowess."
"That would require an incredibly robust body, soul, and mind, right?" Lumian speculated.
Aurore didn't pursue the topic further and instructed her brother, "Help me back to my room. I need to rest."
As Lumian assisted his sister and they walked to her bedroom, he

casually inquired, "What I find odd about that ritual is that I extracted a bit of power from the seal without the bluish-black symbol's owner's consent. Could it be that He has been watching me the entire time? That's impossible. How could He have that much free time?"

Aurore mulled it over for a moment before responding, "You mentioned that the mysterious woman's description of the honorific name was vague and inaccurate to avoid drawing the attention of the corresponding being.

"Could it be that the black thorns and the bluish-black symbol have some sort of shared authority?" Lumian pondered aloud. "Maybe They both have power in the Fate domain. And when you use a vague honorific name, it could refer not only to the person with the black thorns, but also the owner of the bluish-black symbol.

"Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't matter much, but because you have the corresponding symbols and power on the altar, they reacted to the stimulation and the existence discovered your actions. And since you were guided by the mysterious lady, it was easy for you to obtain permission.

"So when you finish reciting all the honorific names and point to the corruption in your body, there won't be any obstacles in extracting some strength. The 'back door' has already been opened."

"What an ingenious ritual design... It has to be an expert at exploiting bugs."

"I see," Lumian said, finally understanding the situation.

Chapter 74: Mute

His sister needed rest, so Lumian couldn't learn new Hermes and ancient Hermes words. He could only revise what he had already learned. Around ten o'clock, he left the house and headed straight to Ol' Tavern.

He had two objectives: first, he wanted to see if the mysterious lady would appear after he became a Dancer and provide him with some knowledge. Second, Leah and the other foreigners lived there. After yesterday's incident, they might not be out today.

Upon entering Ol' Tavern, Lumian quickly scanned the room and was disappointed to find that the spot where the lady usually sat was vacant.

With a slow exhale, he walked to the bar counter, intending to ask if the three foreigners were around.

At this moment, the tavern owner, Maurice Bénet, appeared to have just woken up and was clearly not in high spirits. He had a bulbous nose and was conversing with a customer at the bar.

The customer seemed agitated, gesturing wildly and making muffled sounds, but he couldn't speak.

Mute? Lumian approached curiously and realized the customer wasn't one of the village mutes but Jean Maury, Sybil Berry's husband.

Sybil was the mistress of Padre Guillaume Bénet, sister of Shepherd Pierre Berry, and a member of their small group.

Jean Maury isn't mute... Lumian assessed the middle-aged man in confusion.

His black hair was unkempt, and his stubble was uneven. His eyes were filled with anger and fear.

Uncharacteristically agitated, he gestured urgently, trying to communicate something to the tavern owner.

As Lumian thought, "Odd," he approached the bar counter and knocked on it with a smile.

"Hey, what's going on?

"Maurice, did you sell fake alcohol to Jean? He looks so angry he can't speak."

"What's that got to do with me?" Maurice Bénet quickly defended himself. "He muted himself."

Jean Maury paused and glanced at Lumian, reverting to his usual sullen demeanor.

He then turned and left Ol' Tavern.

After he disappeared through the door, Lumian lowered his voice and asked, "What's wrong with him?"

Maurice Bénet looked outside and whispered, "I heard he caught

Sybil and the padre in bed together last night, and it made him so mad he went mute. Today, he's been telling everyone he sees. Heh, he doesn't even have the guts to go to DariÃ¨ge to confront the padre. What a coward. Serves him right!"
Lumian was baffled and shocked.
If he remembered correctly, Jean Maury knew about his wife Sybil's prolonged affair with the padre. He just didn't want her to be with another man. How could he be so angry that he went mute over something he was prepared for?
Something was off!
Moreover, in the previous cycle, there had been no instance of Jean Maury becoming mute from anger. Otherwise, Lumian would have known.
In Cordu, this was headline news. It would have spread rapidly.
Could it be that their investigations had caused a disturbance, making Jean Maury encounter something he wouldn't have otherwise? As Lumian speculated, he showed an excited expression.
"Is that so?
"Then I'll have to ask him properly!"
Maurice Bénet wasn't surprised by his eagerness for gossip, thinking it was typical.
He scolded jokingly, "Damned kid, be decent and don't provoke that poor man. Besides, he's mute and can't write. How can he tell you what happened?"
Lumian chuckled and said, "Can't he gesture?"
He raised his hands and clenched his left fist, gently hitting his right palm.
Throughout the DariÃ¨ge region and even across southern Intis, this was a universal gesture for the act between a man and a woman.
Maurice Bénet cursed angrily, "I hope you've got some decency left and don't play pranks on that poor man."
"Don't worry. I just want to 'hear' the story." Lumian waved his hand and dashed out of Ol' Tavern, searching for Jean Maury.
However, Lumian didn't know where the man had gone, nor was he gesturing his story to other villagers. Lumian scoured Cordu but found no trace of him.
Finally, he arrived at Jean Maury's house.
At the entrance, Sybil Berry, clad in a grayish-white dress, was sorting through spoiled potatoes.
"What's the matter?" The woman looked up at Lumian.
Like Pierre Berry, she had blue eyes, and her long black hair flowed softly down her back, unlike other married women who always

wore their hair in a bun.
Lumian answered frankly, "I'm looking for Jean Maury?"
With plump cheeks and gentle features, Sybil replied indifferently,"He's not home."
"Then do you know where he went?" Lumian pressed.
Sybil replied calmly, "We had an argument last night. He might have left Cordu and doesn't want to return for the time being."
Lumian's brows twitched. He sensed that something bad had happened.
Clearly, Jean Maury couldn't leave Cordu. That would trigger the cycle and cause a restart!
As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian wore a mischievous grin.
"Why did you guys quarrel? I heard that you and the padre..."
He didn't finish the sentence but instead punched his right palm with his left fist.
Sybil's face turned cold as she cursed in a low voice, "Get lost! Get out of my house!"
Lumian clicked his tongue and left Jean Maury's house.
After walking for a distance, the smile on his face vanished.
In truth, he didn't want to ask about Sybil's affair with the padre. He had seen the padre and Madame Pualis naked. *What else was there to ask?*
But if he didn't ask, it didn't fit his persona in the eyes of the villagers. He had already "visited" them. If he didn't anger the mistress of the house, could he still live up to the name of Prankster King of Cordu?
Therefore, Lumian had no choice but to ask. Otherwise, he might be suspected.
The persona of a character was sometimes useful and sometimes troublesome.
Judging by the padre's actions and the information he had, Lumian suspected that Jean Maury hadn't become mute because of the affair but had uncovered something else.
It was highly likely that he had been poisoned and rendered mute!
I have to find him as soon as possible. If he goes around looking for people to complain to, he might just die like the previous one.
No, he's already missing... The more Lumian thought about it, the more he felt that something had happened to Jean Maury.
The villager who had snitched in DariÃ¨ge previously had fallen to his death for no reason!
Just as Lumian was making his last effort to find Jean Maury, he encountered Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who were "hanging around" in the village.

They were still wearing their original clothes.
"Good morning, my cabbages," Lumian greeted them with a smile.
As soon as they approached, he immediately asked in a low voice, "Did anything happen yesterday?"
Leah replied with a smile, "That madame doesn't seem to want to pursue the matter. She didn't appear."
As expected... Lumian looked around and saw that there was no one nearby. Only then did he tell the three official investigators about his sister's deduction of the Madame Pualis pathway and her guess of Pulitt's identity.
Valentine's expression soured as he listened, while Leah was rather excited.
Ryan recalled and said, "It's rare for a Demoness to appear in Riston Province. We don't know much about this, but the higher-ups should know very well. I'll send a telegram later and tell them about Madame Pualis. Hmm, I'll only mention how Madame Pualis's room has Pulitt's photo, but the Roquefort family doesn't have Pualis."
Seeing Lumian's puzzled expression, Ryan added, "In Intis, Demoness-related matters often happen."
So, my sister's pen pal is also in Intis? Lumian nodded and said, "So far, Madame Pualis doesn't seem to have anything to do with the loop. Also, she seems to be aware of the loop. That might be why she didn't pursue our search of the castle.
"Is it possible that we can join forces with her to some extent?"
Valentine blurted out, "How can I work with such an evil and filthy person who's even more terrifying than a demon?"
Lumian didn't even look at him. He turned his gaze to Ryan and Leah.
Seeing that they were somewhat hesitant, he tried to persuade them earnestly.
"A limited cooperation, only in the loop. When this damned loop is resolved, you can deal with her however you want! You can even tell her directly about this. I believe she can understand and accept it."
Ryan thought for a few seconds, patted Valentine's shoulder, and said to Lumian, "Indeed, the most important thing now is to resolve this loop. However, we can't be sure of that madame's attitude. We don't dare to visit her directly. I'm afraid we'll have to trouble you or your sister to communicate with her and inquire."
"Alright," Lumian agreed.
He planned to do it himself.
He didn't want his sister to be alone with Madame Pualis when he realized that she might harbor abnormal feelings for his sister.

Valentine kept a poker face as he listened to their conversation. He neither agreed nor disagreed.
Lumian peered around furtively once more.
"There are three more clues..."
He recounted Reimund's case, Jean Maury's situation, and the "burial chamber" where the owl had flown into.
Leah was stunned.
"How did you get so many clues so quickly?"
She even suspected this guy or his sister were off. That was why there were red flags and clues everywhere.
Who were the real investigators here? *Why hadn't we caught on?*
"Blame yourselves for not remembering the first two cycles." Lumian smirked, spreading his hands in mock innocence.
Leah nodded, swallowing his explanation.
Ryan mulled it over for a beat before uttering in a gravelly voice, "Then we gotta investigate the cathedral catacombs ASAP. Yeah, it's probably very dangerous down there. You should contact Madame Pualis first. If she's down to joining, we'll have a way higher chance of nailing this."

Chapter 75: Meeting Madame Pualis Again

Outside the administrator's residence, a building transformed from an old castle.

Lumian strolled through the gardens and approached the front door. He said to the valet standing guard, "I need a word with Madame Pualis."

The valet—clad in a crimson shirt and ivory pants—sized him up warily and asked, "What's this about?"

Is this brat here to make trouble?

Lumian scoffed. "That's not for you to know."

Why would some servant care so much? Who do you think you are? How many kids have you popped out?

The valet hesitated before deciding to pass the message to Madame Pualis and let her decide if she wanted to entertain this cheeky young man.

Lumian loitered by the entrance for a few minutes. When the valet returned, Lumian said, "Madame will see you in the small parlor."

The small parlor was familiar to Lumian. The few times he had accompanied his sister here, he had been entertained in that very room. Without needing directions, Lumian made his way to the correct room. The valet trailed behind like an obedient dog.

Lumian sprawled on the sofa in the parlor and helped himself to the black tea. Then Madame Pualis glided through the doorway.

The lady was dressed to kill in an exquisite black corset dress, a matching shawl draped over her shoulders. She wore a slightly askew lady's round hat and a diamond necklace laced in gold.

The outfit struck Lumian as familiar. He realized that Madame Pualis had worn this very ensemble when she came to seduce him. She did that on purpose, didn't she? Lumian thought with an icy smile.

"Good morning, Madame Pualis."

Just as the greeting left his lips, Lumian suddenly noticed the figure beside Madame Pualis. It wasn't Cathy, the lady's maid, but the 'midwife' who had met her demise at Ryan's hands just yesterday.

The 'midwife' wore a grayish white dress. Her eyes were blank, her face expressionless. Her skin had a bluish tinge, identical to when Lumian had seen her corpse in the garden the previous evening. However, she wasn't carrying any gardening tools this time.

Bringing the 'midwife' instead of her maid? She did that on purpose too, didn't she? Lumian couldn't help the cynical thought.

Madame Pualis smiled. "It should be noon by now."

She settled into the armchair that signified the host, while the

'midwife' stood to one side like an accessory.
"If you haven't eaten lunch, it's not noon yet," Lumian quipped.
His heart raced underneath the retort. He suspected Madame Pualis had brought the 'midwife' here to interrogate him about yesterday's events.
If he didn't handle this well and Leah's group didn't restart the cycle in time, Lumian suspected he might have to play 'daddy' for a few minutes. Or longer.
Madame Pualis glanced at him, her bright eyes sparkling with an inscrutable smile.
Casually, she asked, "What seems to be the trouble?"
Lumian decided to cut to the chase. Solemnly, he said, "Madame, you must have realized we're stuck in a time loop."
As he spoke, he watched Madame Pualis's face closely, alert for any reaction.
If she revealed surprise, shock or confusion, he would quickly add, "Just kidding!" Then, he would start with something odd and see how she responded. Only then would he consider telling her about the time loop.
Of course, if Madame Pualis looked like she already knew and her 'secret' was out, escape would be his top priority.
The odds of escape were slim in that scenario, but how would he know if there was any hope without trying?
Madame Pualis sized Lumian up for a few seconds, then smiled.
"Looks like you've found a boss too."
She didn't seem surprised by the time loop concept, nor did she look puzzled. That was as good as admitting she knew what was going on.
Boss? That was a favorite word in Aurore's books. Did she mean some higher power that granted boons? Lumian interpreted Madame Pualis's words.
He believed she could retain memories across loops only because she had a 'boss'—some kind of protection.
Lumian smiled and pretended to sigh in relief. "Seems I won't need to explain much."
"What are you getting at?" Pualis asked, still smiling.
The 'midwife' stood motionless beside her like a mannequin.
Lumian had an excuse prepared and launched into it with enough charm to convince anyone.
"People outside already know about Cordu's abnormality. If we don't end this loop soon, this place will be wiped out. Everyone dies.
"We're in the same boat. Only by uniting can we avoid sinking. Only then do we have a chance of finding the key to escape this

loop and return to normal life.
"Madame, time is running out. Let's work together."
Madame Pualis listened with a faint smile, not interrupting Lumian's story.
At this, she chuckled. "Who said we're in this together?"
What? *Could she be the one wanting to sink the boat?* Lumian grew alarmed.
Madame Pualis maintained her smile. "Why should I cooperate with you? I can leave here at a specific time."
Wh... Lumian was stunned, but a glimmer of hope flickered.
"Are you saying you have a way out of the time loop? You only need to do something at a precise time?"
Madame Pualis nodded and sipped her tea from fine porcelain. She said nothing else.
The perks of a higher power's protection... Wait, this isn't the first cycle. *Why is she still here?* Could other cycles have restarted before that specific time? Hmm... That explains why she didn't pursue us infiltrating the castle and killing the 'midwife'. She fears the three Beyonders causing trouble and forcibly restarting the cycle... Lumian grasped things that had puzzled him.
He suspected Madame Pualis was also waiting for the twelfth night.
Amid his thoughts, Lumian smiled. "I wonder if you can take Aurore and me out of this cycle?"
What official investigators? I've never heard of them!
Madame Pualis appraised him with amusement.
"Why should I help you?"
"Didn't you say that love..." Lumian stopped, unable to continue.
He meant to mention Madame Pualis's words about love, hoping she might save him and Aurore out of kindness. But since Madame Pualis likely desired his sister, he couldn't say it.
If Madame Pualis loved him, a shameless man like Lumian would have played the love card and offered to bear her child to get them out of this loop.
Well, he would grit his teeth and give birth himself if it meant Madame Pualis evacuating him and Aurore from this cycle.
Madame Pualis's expression shifted slightly. After a few seconds of silence, she said, "Are you suggesting love is unfathomable? Saving her despite clearly wanting her dead for her mistake?"
Lumian didn't answer. He could tell Madame Pualis referred to a 'she'.
Madame Pualis didn't expect a response. She sighed, "But what if it's irredeemable?"
Irredeemable... Lumian's heart sank like plunging into an icy lake

in early spring.
Regaining his breath, he asked for confirmation,
"You mean, at that time, you can only take a few people, but that doesn't include me or Aurore?"
Madame Pualis nodded.
"You can see it that way."
Looks like I still have to rely on myself... Lumian sighed, forcing calm.
The rise and crash of hope was unpleasant indeed.
He thought for a moment, then smiled.
"Madame, the three foreigners and I will explore the cathedral's underground later. If anything happens, the cycle might restart ahead of time. We won't even make it to Lent."
Let alone the twelfth night.
Madame Pualis narrowed her eyes, chin raised. "Are you threatening me?"
"No, just a reminder." Lumian smiled sincerely, the picture of relaxed.
Outwardly, he feared angering Madame Pualis and being confined here to give birth. The three investigators would restart the cycle if he didn't emerge fifteen minutes later.
Madame Pualis gazed into Lumian's eyes for a few seconds. Seeing no flinch or evasion, she suddenly smiled.
"You're truly interesting. It would be lovely if you and your sister became my lovers."
Without waiting for a response, she turned to the 'midwife'.
"You destroyed a Heretic Spellmaster, yet I didn't blame you. I'm merciful enough, but you still expect my help?"
Heretic Spellmaster? Lumian filed away the term and said earnestly, "This isn't about help. It's about doing what benefits everyone."
Madame Pualis fell silent for a few seconds before smiling again.
"I won't explore the cathedral's underground with you, but for Aurore's sake and your courage, I'll provide some help if anything happens."
Lumian was satisfied to negotiate this much. He stood and mimicked the gentlemanly posture from his sister's books. Pressing a hand to his chest, he bowed. "I thank you, my lady."
Madame Pualis chuckled. "Shouldn't it be 'my sunshine'?"
She referred to what Lumian had said in a previous loop: "Madame, you are my sunshine."
Lumian felt embarrassed but had always been shameless. Pretending not to hear, he left the small parlor.
.....

After descending the hill from the castle and entering Cordu, Lumian spotted Leah, Ryan and Valentine waiting to greet him.
"How did it go?" Leah asked with a smile.
Lumian recounted his conversation with Madame Pualis, concluding, "This is the best outcome we could hope for."
"That's right. We can still count on someone to help in our direst moment." Ryan nodded.
Lumian asked, "Did you get a reply?"
Before visiting the castle, Ryan had reported Madame Pualis wasn't truly of the Roquefort family and Pulitt's photo was in her room.
Leah exhaled, answering for Ryan, "Our superiors remind us to consider the possibility of Pulitt becoming a woman through potion or power."
"As expected," Lumian tersely acknowledged. "When do we explore the cathedral's underground?"
Ryan had already decided. In a deep voice, he said, "Now."

Chapter 76: Physical Examination

"Now?" Lumian jumped in fright.

Though eager to explore the cathedral's underground, not to this extent!

A thought occurred. "Can't we wait until nightfall?"

In the dead of night with only two or three servants left in the cathedral, wouldn't it be easy for Beyonders like them to infiltrate?

Ryan replied gently yet firmly, "Now is the ideal time. Think about it. If we realize there's no one in the cathedral at night and it lacks protection, how could the padre and company not realize the same? I suspect they'll send their strongest to guard it in shifts or set subtle traps. Once triggered, there'll be an alarm.

"And now, it's nearly noon. All villagers have gone home, so no one will come pray at this hour. Furthermore, it's daytime, so the traps won't activate to prevent accidents. With the two padres and servants in the cathedral, it's easy for people to lower their guard. In short, their strongest will be home eating in peace. We only face the padre, deputy padre and three odd-job workers."

Lumian nodded, grasping it, and finished Ryan's thought.

"And before April 3rd, the padre is still an ordinary person without supernatural powers."

Today was April 1st.

"Plus, though the deputy padre seems off, he's clearly not a core member of the padre's team. Same for the three odd-job workers," Leah added with a smile. "Can't four Beyonders handle five ordinary people silently?"

Lumian hesitated before replying, "But won't this make it impossible to reach the twelfth night?"

This amounted to triggering an abnormality on the padre's side. History would change accordingly.

"You said it yourself. Compared to us, the padre and company will hold back until Lent to usher in the twelfth night. As long as we don't kill him, finding someone entering the basement will make him pretend not to notice and accelerate gaining supernatural powers," Leah said smiling. "Gaining power, he might hunt us with the others, but Cordu isn't small and we're not weak. We can hide and stall until Lent."

Lumian accepted this reasoning. "Alright, let's do it now." He reminded them, "But Aurore's eyes haven't fully healed. I'm afraid she can't help us."

Before seeing Madame Pualis, Lumian had checked on Aurore. Her eyes might only recover by evening.

"It's fine. Madame Pualis backs us, doesn't she?" Leah said half-

jokingly, the bells above her head ringing.
Lumian no longer objected and cautiously suggested, "Before the cathedral, let's walk around the village and confirm Shepherd Pierre Berry and the dangerous ones are home."
He wanted to avoid running into Pierre and the others, who had received a boon, upon entering the basement.
Ryan nodded approval, agreeing.
Discussing details, Valentine glanced coldly at Lumian. "Do you need cleansing?"
Leah quickly explained on her companion's behalf, "You went into the castle and spoke with Madame Pualis. You might have been corrupted again."
"No, I believe Madame Pualis won't do that this time. It's meaningless." Lumian felt certain.
He had no choice but to feel certain. He dared not let Valentine purify him again. Compared to yesterday, he was already a Dancer. Evil aura had seeped from the seal inside. Once purified by holy water, there would likely be huge trouble.
According to Aurore's analysis, he needed full-body purification.
Seeing Lumian having no issue with it, Valentine, just being kind, naturally said no more.
Then, wandering Cordu, Lumian made his way home and told Aurore their plan.
Aurore was vexed at the inability to join and help. She could only offer to wait in the village edge and restart the cycle if anything went wrong. This required little vision. It sufficed to vaguely see the road. Agreeing to have her restart before anyone came for her at 12:30, Lumian bid Aurore farewell and reconvened with Leah's group.
By then, the three official Beyonders had confirmed where Shepherd Pierre Berry and the padre's core members were.
Making a half detour, they reached the cathedral's side along a small path, the door they had used to catch the padre and Madame Pualis's affair in a previous cycle.
Lumian readied to volunteer when Leah strode over, using a wire to fiddle with the lock and push open the dark wooden door.
Seeing Lumian's surprise, she smiled. "It's a necessary technique for investigation."
Don't make it sound so noble... Lumian didn't voice his thoughts as Leah had already entered the cathedral.
The small silver bells on her veil and boots didn't move or make a sound.
Lumian tried interpreting this.
"It's very safe entering the cathedral. No danger?"

Leah glanced back. "Please add 'limited to dealing with the cathedral's people.'"
Did this mean danger in the basement remained unknown?
Lumian roughly understood, gaining insight into divination. However, even improved by Dancer, he lacked divination.
Ryan passed him, following Leah into the cathedral.
Steps in, a servant approached.
In a blink, Ryan rushed over, raised a hand and chopped the servant behind an ear.
The servant crumpled soundlessly. Ryan caught and dragged him into the nearest room.
Leah rushed over, taking a colorless liquid-filled bottle and pouring it down the servant's throat.
"What's this?" Lumian asked, curious.
Leah maintained her smile.
"A sedative."
You're well prepared... Lumian sighed inwardly.
Taking down the three odd-job workers without alerting the padre, Leah crept into the padre's room through the shadows, silently turning the handle and cracking the wooden door. She saw Cordu's mightiest man in a gold-threaded white robe, breathing slowly and deeply on a simple bed.
Plates for lunch and silver cutlery were on a table by the door.
Leah sized him up and leapt in, chopping the padre behind his ear.
Immediately, she poured most of the remaining sedative down Guillaume Bénet's throat.
"That's it?" Lumian stuck his head out from behind Leah.
Wasn't this too easy?
"What else? What did you expect of an ordinary person?" Leah asked, amused.
Lumian tersely acknowledged, lifting the padre's robe.
"What are you doing?" Leah was shocked yet smiling.
Lumian said without turning, "Checking his body."
He wanted to see if the padre had the black thorn symbol on his chest.
Soon, the padre Guillaume Bénet's top half was exposed, revealing nothing but tufts of black hair.
No black thorn symbol. No black mark of a special contract.
Lumian nodded imperceptibly, muttering, Looks like the symbol is received after accepting the boon. Or does it exist now but only activates through Cogitation?
And how did I get mine? The twelfth night?
Thinking the padre Guillaume Bénet might lack the black thorn symbol now, Lumian couldn't help evil thoughts.

If I kill him now, will it trigger the cycle?
How would killing this man in advance impact later events?
Considering the padre's importance later, Lumian— still wanting to wait for the twelfth night—convinced himself otherwise.
Leaving the padre's room, Ryan said to Lumian and Leah, "Can't find the deputy padre."
"Ah?" Lumian hesitated before understanding. "Maybe he's home. He's not allowed to live in the cathedral, and no one brings him food."
"This demon's lackey is truly tyrannical," Valentine cursed, glancing at the padre in the room.
Without further ado, the quartet headed in the opposite direction for the altar.
In a corner loomed a stone staircase, narrow and steep, allowing only one person to pass through.
It ascended into the cathedral's roof before winding deeper underground.
Leah took point. After taking a few flights of stairs to the bottom, the veil and the four small silver bells on her boots rang at the same time.
Ding ding dang dang. The sound wasn't loud but echoed faintly in the small space. Sometimes urgent, sometimes soothing.
"What does this mean?" Lumian struggled to interpret it based on his past encounters.
Leah turned aside and grinned.
"It means there's a level of risk, but I can't determine how serious."
"The divination had worked for the castle..." Lumian muttered to himself in surprise. "Doesn't this mean it's even more dangerous underground?"
"Not necessarily," Leah soothed. "Perhaps it's just interference. Hadn't Madame Pualis been absent at the castle?"
At this point, it was impossible to back out over such a trivial hiccup. They descended the stairs one by one into the depths.
Soon, the four saw an old brown wooden door in the basement.
Leah pinched her glabella and activated her Spirit Vision before approaching the wooden door.
Though Lumian hadn't mastered activating Spirit Vision, with the Dancer's spirituality boost, it didn't take long for him to activate it. He saw everyone glowing red and healthy.
When her companions were set, Leah opened the basement door.
Amidst the creaking, Lumian caught a whiff of a familiar fragrance. Elegant and sweet.
He instantly made the connection and hurriedly told Ryan and the others, "Smells like gray amber."

This was the material used to revere the hidden entity called Inevitability!

Chapter 77: Changes

Lumian had briefly informed Ryan and the others about the black thorn symbol on Guillaume Bénet's chest, "Inevitability" in the hidden entity's honorific, gray amber, tulips, cloves, and deer musk for the corresponding domain. He claimed the source was the padre, and it had nothing to do with him.

Hearing this, Leah, Ryan, and Valentine immediately grew alert with guesses.

"The sacrificial site?" Ryan muttered.

As he spoke, all looked to the basement.

With dim light trickling down the stairs, they could barely see inside.

The space under the cathedral was bigger than Lumian's whole first floor. The floor was grayish-white stone slabs, and it looked pitch black due to the lack of light. In the middle stood a stone platform half a man's height.

The top of the stone platform caved in slightly, as if hiding something, but nobody could see clearly.

As Lumian pondered, he whispered, "This might be where the padre and company pray to the evil entity for boons."

"They actually built the evil god's altar under the cathedral!" Valentine was furious. Lumian suspected he would combust any second and turn to holy light to purify everything here.

"Calm down," Ryan patted Valentine's shoulder. "Get ready to light the fire."

He then gestured for Leah to scout.

Leah kept her sweet smile and sniffed.

"That hidden entity with 'Inevitability' as an honorific name really likes fragrance..."

Sighing, she entered the basement, lips moving as if chanting.

The four silver bells chimed again, sometimes intense, sometimes soothing.

One step, two steps, three steps... Leah turned and said to Ryan and the others, "Nothing unusual around the entrance."

Ryan, Lumian, and Valentine entered the basement through the old brown wooden door and came to where Leah had stopped.

Leah kept moving forward.

After a few steps, the silver bell on her veil and boots shook violently.

Ding ding dang dang!

The sound spread everywhere.

Specks of dawn-like light immediately appeared around Ryan and condensed, forming silver full-body armor over him.

Simultaneously, a pure broadsword of light appeared in Ryan's hand.
Valentine spread his arms, letting golden illusory flames burn around him.
One flame suddenly lengthened and widened, and Leah walked out of it.
She returned to Lumian and the others from near the altar.
How magical... Lumian marveled at Leah's act again. Compared to the Sun pathway's abilities and Ryan's combat state he could understand and imagine, Leah's various acts were even more bizarre and more magical. For example, her ability to transfer his wound from his thigh to his calf edge yesterday blew his mind.
Faced with the sudden 'alarm,' Lumian responded the only way he could.
He drew the iron-black axe and hid behind Ryan, whose body had grown much larger.
In this, he sized up his surroundings but found no abnormal changes.
He had his Spirit Vision on, after all.
Of course, Lumian had found something. With the golden flames' help, he saw piles of human bones at the basement edge. Some were even covered in light sheepskin.
Sacrificial offerings from before? The padre and company have conducted cultist rituals here for at least half a year, but Aurore and I didn't notice at all... Lumian's thoughts raced as he again felt Cordu, where he'd lived nearly five years, was unfamiliar. At some point, this place had become abnormal. Perhaps, it had been abnormal from the beginning.
Ryan warily eyed the altar direction and asked, "Is everything alright?"
Leah shook her head. "I don't feel any issues, just signs of danger."
"Strange..." Lumian's voice trailed off as he turned to Leah.
He saw that the beautiful woman's face had turned translucent, and twisted maggots seemed to crawl below. She was even scarier and eviler than legendary evil spirits, making his scalp tingle and heart race wildly.
This exceeded Lumian's imagination. He suspected he'd have nightmares for a long time.
"Y-your face!" he warned Leah, unable to contain his fear.
Leah subconsciously touched her face with her right hand, and her expression changed.
As for whether her expression changed, Lumian couldn't tell from the transparent and distorted maggots.
Leah hurriedly looked at her hand back. The skin there had also

turned translucent, and the flesh below seemed to have turned into strange maggots.
"You're losing control!" Valentine also noticed Leah's condition.
Leah muttered confused, "But my mental state is alright."
Ryan tilted his head and reminded, "Make sure you're not hallucinating."
Almost simultaneously, Lumian realized the tall warrior was rapidly shrinking. The silver armor over him and broadsword of light disintegrated.
In a blink, Ryan turned into a short man only about 1.5 meters tall. His brown coat and light yellow strides were either too big or too long.
He's also mutating? Only Valentine and I are fine... Lumian's pupils dilated as he subconsciously looked at Valentine.
"Ryan, you've shrunk!" Valentine, already a pure light figure, warned his companion anxiously.
Lumian, nearly blinded, hurriedly asked Leah, "Any changes for me?"
Leah said with countless transparent maggots that seemed to want to crawl out but couldn't leave the flesh, "You're very normal. But under such circumstances, normality might be the greatest abnormality."
I'm normal? Could the black thorn symbol have protected me, causing the danger here to think I'm one of them? Lumian suddenly guessed.
At this, Ryan had finished checking his body. He said warily, "I'm not shrinking, but I've returned to my former self. I've even lost my superpowers."
"Former self?" Lumian blurted.
He vaguely thought of something.
Ryan nodded. "Yes, I'm naturally short. As a man, this is a huge misfortune. So I chose Warrior when selecting my potion. It could effectively change my height.
"I don't know if I'm lucky or not. The past five to six years had many Beyonder monsters and abnormalities related to the Warrior pathway appear, allowing me to be less worried about the materials needed to advance."
Hearing Ryan's words, Lumian roughly understood the anomaly's source.
"You've returned to the past! As far as I know, the authority of that hidden existence is related to the past..."
With that, he mimicked the mysterious lady and deliberately paused a few seconds before adding another word.
"It also involves the present and— and— and the future."

Though now speaking Intis, he still had to be cautious.
Leah reacted quickly and blurted, "Valentine and I have entered the future. Is this the state of one of our futures?"
"And I'm the present?" Lumian asked, confirming Leah's guess.
He then thought of the three-faced monster he had encountered in the dream ruins.
The monster had only one head, but it bore three faces: one aged, one in its prime, one youthful.
Lumian suspected this was another gift from the owner of the black thorn symbol. Moreover, it was of a higher order, but the recipient couldn't withstand it or had met with an accident, turning into a three-faced monster.
Leah nodded gently.
"Likely, but this change in state doesn't affect my mind. I don't feel like I'm about to lose control at all."
"Nor do I feel like I'm immolating," Valentine added.
Ryan pondered a moment and said, "Similarly, I didn't lose my memories.
"Perhaps there's only a little power left here that can't affect the mind, heart, and memories, but if we maintain this state for too long, I'm unsure if there will be any serious aftereffects."
"I'm fine. At most, I'll consume the potion again and advance again. As for you, there should be many possibilities in the future, but now, perhaps the future has been determined, one will lose control, and the other will transform into holy light. This is an inevitability I understand."
"How frightening," Leah exclaimed with a smile. "Luckily, we can restart the cycle while also attempting to seek the present here."
Seeing that there were no terrifying monsters attacking, Lumian suggested, "Shall we go out first and see if we can recover naturally?
"Besides, we might encounter a power that represents the present along the way."
Ryan didn't object. "We can give it a shot."
He was now an ordinary person, and it would be dangerous for him to go any further.
"I'm afraid that another change in state will cause me to lose control," Leah said cautiously.
It would definitely be good to encounter the 'present,' but it would be troublesome to encounter the 'past.' They didn't know what would happen if 'future' was additionally stacked on them.
Lumian took the initiative to say, "Let me scout the way. I still have a chance to change my state."
He mainly wanted to see if his luck was good enough to encounter

the 'present' or if the black thorn symbol on his chest protected him.
"Be careful," Ryan warned, and Leah nodded.
Valentine's gaze on Lumian grew less cold.
He couldn't help but think, This lad has a very sacrificial spirit. Furthermore, he's a devout believer of the lord. Once the cycle is lifted, let's see if there's a way to remove the hidden corruption on his body and let him join our team.
Seeing that Lumian was about to take a step forward, Valentine, who had regained his composure, suggested, "Let me see if I can rid myself of this state first."
No one objected. Lumian was the same. This was because he was in the present. He didn't need to remove any negative state or undergo purification.
In the next second, he realized he had miscalculated.
Valentine didn't directly use Holy Water Creation to purify Leah and Ryan. Instead, he used Sun Halo.
A dark golden light flashed, and an invisible force spread in all directions.

Chapter 78: Traces

Lumian jumped in fright. It was too late to evade, so he could only brace for the invisible force to crash upon him.

He instantly felt warmth, and valor flooded his body. It was as if the sun had at last arrived in winter when he lacked clothes.

Other than that, he felt nothing peculiar. It was precisely the same as the experience in the castle yesterday afternoon.

Eh, as a Dancer, am I actually unscathed? Lumian couldn't help but swivel his head to glimpse the short Ryan and the terrifying Leah. He realized that there was no black fog or smoke billowing from them.

Promptly after, Valentine, who was in the form of a figure of light, conjured Holy Water Creation and let fall a few drops on Leah and Ryan. However, the two of them retained their transformed semblances with no signs of improvement.

"Purification and exorcism are futile?" Lumian asked.

He hoped to determine why it was possible and why not. Only then would he, who had already received a boon, know what to evade or feign that nothing had transpired when encountering something similar in the future.

Ryan briefly explained to him, "Purification and exorcism aren't omnipotent. The correspondent power is in the category of evil. For instance, the aura of depravity and all undead. The last isn't necessarily evil, but it's incompatible with the real world. It needs to return to the spirit world, so it can still be purified and exorcized."

"Just like how our definition of an evil god is based on Their style of acting, the power of an evil god isn't necessarily evil."

Lumian roughly fathomed and thoughtfully asked, "Inevitability's, uh, power doesn't belong to evil, nor does it signify depravity?"

So there is no way to purify or exorcize it?

"Yes." Valentine had already affirmed this through his previous attempt.

From the looks of it, it's normal for me to be able to withstand the halo. But why can the holy water activate the black thorn symbol on my chest and permit me to hear the terrifying sound? This is because the corruption in the seal doesn't belong to me at the moment. It's incompatible with my body, rendering my body impure. Therefore, it needs to be purified? Lumian made a guess.

He had wanted to use Shepherd Pierre Berry, who had already received a boon, as an example to ask if the mutation of the body was also in the category of evil and depravity, but the current situation was rather urgent, so he didn't have the luxury to discuss

the topic.
Lumian tried to walk to the basement door.
After taking two steps, he suddenly heard a buzzing sound in his ears. He could vaguely hear a voice that seemed to come from an infinite distance but also seemed to be right before him. However, it wasn't clear enough and was very fuzzy. It only made his chest heat up slightly and his mind enter a state of disorder.
This was very similar to when he saw Noodle Man dancing.
This made Lumian confirm that the black thorn symbol on his chest had been partially activated.
He quickly pivoted around and gazed at Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, only to find that they didn't react abnormally.
Lumian was immediately disheartened. He originally believed that the two symbols on his chest could suppress and weaken Beyonders to a certain extent, but from the looks of it, they could only target the monsters in the dream ruins, especially those that had been bestowed by the owner of the black thorn symbol.
Of course, he wasn't sure if fully activating the symbol on his chest would affect the surrounding Beyonders.
"Has my condition changed?" he asked Leah and the others.
"No." Leah and the others shook their heads in unison.
Lumian nodded indistinctly and affirmed two things.
The first was the black thorn symbol on his chest, or rather, the evil god corruption sealed in his body. It could indeed help him "resist" the abnormality in the basement.
Secondly, luck was on his side. He was affected by the power of the present.
After a few seconds, Lumian attempted to take a diagonal step forward.
The slight heat in his chest did not weaken, maintaining its previous intensity.
"Any changes this time?" he asked Ryan and the others again.
Leah was the first to shake her head. "You're fine."
Lumian exhaled and muttered inwardly, With the protection of the black thorn symbol, I can move freely here. Shepherd Pierre Berry and company should be the same...
Wait, the padre hasn't received any blessings yet. There's no thorn symbol! *How did he reach the altar unscathed?*
With this in mind, Lumian grasped something as he turned his gaze to the ground.
With the help of Valentine's light, he saw many messy footprints that ordinary humans couldn't see.
Apart from a small number of them, which were everywhere, they followed a certain pattern and extended to the front of the altar.

Lumian immediately overlapped with the nearest footprint, and the slight heat in his chest began to weaken.
This meant that he had returned to the present.
As expected, there's a safe route here that leads to the present! Lumian suddenly became very happy. This was because the three powerful Beyonders, Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, hadn't discovered it, and he, a mere Hunter, had found it.
This reminded him of something his sister Aurore had said: "Every pathway has its strengths. Before becoming a demigod, Sequence 9 of some paths might trump Sequence 5 of others in certain situations."
Lumian had originally felt inferior and suppressed, useless before the powerful Beyonders these past two days of exploration. Now, he'd regained a good amount of confidence.
Finding faint traces in reality is a Hunter's specialty. Can you?
Of course, Lumian didn't forget that Aurore added: "But there are pathways good at everything."
He gathered his thoughts, turned around, and commanded Ryan, Leah, and Valentine. "Take a step toward the altar at the same time."
Ryan and the others were clearly puzzled. They couldn't just trust Lumian blindly without knowing why.
Lumian could only explain, "Look closely at the ground There are many footprints marking a safe path left behind by the padre's group!"
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, lacking Lumian's abilities, could barely see a trace in the sun's dim light. They believed him.
They knew that in Intis, many Hunter pathway Beyonders had collaborated. Some Sequences were skilled at detecting faint signs.
Following Lumian's guidance, they trekked the secure route.
Instantly, Lumian saw Ryan regain height, Valentine darken, and Leah's face normalize.
They had returned to the present, no longer trapped in the past or future.
Lumian easily rejoined the team on the safe route.
He grinned and said, "No more slip-ups. There may be no coming back if anything else goes south."
He was mimicking Ryan's tone and felt it fit their current situation.
Typically, his attitude would've had him mocking them: "Haha, are you blind? Can't you see any of the obvious signs? Another mistake and you're done for!"
Leah touched her face and breathed a sigh of relief. "We're with you."

Lumian wasn't humble. He carefully picked out the footprints on the ground and crept up to the altar.
It wasn't as straightforward as heading back just now since it didn't matter if he took a wrong turn, but Ryan and the others couldn't.
This time, Leah's silver bells stayed silent.
Only once all four had reached the altar did they start ringing, sometimes soothing, other times intense.
"It's dangerous, but we can find a way around it," Leah, experienced enough, explained.
Ryan instantly nodded.
"Don't touch anything here for now. We'll just observe."
Lumian had already set his sights above the altar.
There was a depression at the bottom, as if hollowed out to hold something. Inside were grayish-white candles, a small bottle of clear liquid, and an unopened wooden box.
But the most striking item was a black object--a long robe with a hood.
In front, in the center of the circle, was a circular symbol made of thorns.
Every part of it was twisted and pitch-black, as if painted with some strange substance. It gave the feeling of slowly oozing.
Seeing the symbol, Lumian felt dizzy and ringing in his ears.
Ryan snorted, and a dawn-like light naturally emanated from him.
This helped Leah and Valentine suppress the mental confusion.
"Don't stare at that symbol too long," Ryan said in a deep voice.
Lumian quickly shifted his gaze aside.
The dizziness and ringing in his ears lessened.
That seems to be all for the altar. Lumian was about to suggest searching the area when he heard Leah ask Ryan, "*Will your Sunrise Gleam activate the altar?*"
Huh? Lumian whipped his head around and unconsciously looked at the altar again.
Ding ding ding. Leah's veil and silver boots rang harshly, an urgent warning.
In the same breath, the black altar robe leaped up as if inhabited by an invisible being.
Ooo! A chill wind gusted. Lumian glimpsed transparent faces under the hood--ferocious, warped heads radiating hatred. They swarmed into a strange, terrifying gestalt.
Lumian recognized one face: pale, swollen, with blood and tears pooling in its eyes. Reimund.
Lumian dodged behind Ryan, uninterested in a closer look.

"Save us! Save us!"
The translucent faces shrieked in unison. Their shrill cries pierced Ryan and the others like needles, threatening to fell them.
Valentine was unmoved. Arms spread, he summoned a holy flame-wreathed pillar of light from the sky. It landed over the black robe.
Light erupted. Lumian and Leah shut their eyes on instinct.

Chapter 79: Sufferer

Sensing the light dim, Lumian hurriedly opened his eyes.

The black robe lay charred on the altar, resisting the golden flames licking at its edges. Yet still it struggled to stand, like a cursed puppet refusing to die.

The translucent faces of Reimund and the others flickered in and out of existence around him, ghosts trapped between the present and a future obliterated.

"Down!" Ryan bellowed.

Lumian dropped without hesitation. If there had been time, he would have thrown himself flat to the ground.

Leah and Valentine were a heartbeat behind, scrambling to duck.

In the same instant, Ryan plunged the Sword of Dawn into the altar's heart, piercing the robe.

Silently the broadsword shattered into a resplendent storm of light, tearing the altar asunder.

When the radiance cleared, Lumian peered up to find the altar a ruin, reduced by a third. Candles, thorns, and black cloth had vanished, ground to dust floating on the air.

Incredible power... Lumian had pondered this strike since the day before.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

Leah rose and spun swiftly around. The four silver bells decorating her veil and boots jangled ominously, their tune neither reassuring nor alarming.

"This isn't over." She warned Ryan and Valentine before murmuring. "The altar's gone—so what's the catch?"

As she spoke, Valentine conjured golden flames that floated in the air and lit up the space.

At the far end of the basement, there was naught but piled human bones and a few sheepskins. The ceiling was bare and unadorned —not even a chandelier.

Lumian snickered. "No Beyonder characteristics?"

"Maybe they were sacrificed," Ryan said bluntly. "It's also likely they didn't get many boons in the beginning and weren't tough enough. They could only nab normal folks as sacrifices and only go after Beyonders once they had decent powers. For instance, this time."

It was clear they weren't unfamiliar with getting boons.

Ryan then said, "There's nothing else here. We should bail. No point tangling with danger we can't see."

Lumian didn't react. Lumian scanned the room again, searching for any hidden doors from the subtle traces.

The answer was no.
He led the way out of the basement, Leah, Ryan and Valentine trailing behind.
As soon as Lumian emerged, Ryan grunted in pain.
His body flew backward, slamming into the basement door. The rickety stairs shuddered.
Wham!
Some invisible spear had pierced Ryan's chest, pinning him to the wall. Blood gushed from the gaping wound. If Ryan hadn't jerked aside just in time, that spear would've skewered his heart.
Leah, who had her Spirit Vision activated the entire time, couldn't detect their attacker.
It was as if some deity had singled Ryan out for punishment.
Before they could figure out what was going on, Leah's smile twisted into a grimace.
Her arms snapped back on their own. Bones shattered with a crunch as her limbs went limp. A crater bloomed in her stomach, as if she'd been sucker-punched. The impact sent her staggering backwards into the wall.
Valentine shrieked from the foot of the stairs.
His ribs collapsed one by one, like a sledgehammer was pounding his chest. With a series of bangs, bloody holes tore through Leah and Valentine's stomach and chest, spearing them to the stone wall.
Lumian was stunned for a moment. While this inexplicable change confused him, he was relieved that he didn't appear to be the target of this bizarre attack.
Did that black thorn symbol protect me? As this thought flashed through his mind, he suddenly felt an invisible force slam him against the wall by the stairs.
There was nothing visible with his Spirit Vision.
Remembering what had happened to Ryan and the others, Lumian immediately dodged to the side.
Intense agony instantly filled his mind. The skin on his right chest tore open, roughly exposing his lungs.
Lumian felt as if an invisible rod had impaled him and nailed him to the wall.
As his bright red blood flowed out, Ryan lit up the area with spots of light that looked like dawn. This would effectively banish evil and dispel illusions.
However, the four of them still couldn't see anything.
Bang!
Ryan's chest caved in, hit by an invisible hammer.
As Leah's veil and silver bell boots rang out intensely, her nails

were pried out by an invisible force, staining them red.
This indescribable pain contorted her face in terror.
Valentine spread his arms and let the holy pillar of light descend upon him. The light of the sun suddenly erupted, obliterating all evil and igniting Valentine's body. However, in the sun's glare, his arms were uncontrollably wrenched backward and stuck to the wall. Two blood-red holes appeared on his wrists, nailing them in place.
When the light faded, Valentine's face was charred, and his skin peeled off inch by inch.
Seeing their ordeal, Lumian couldn't help but feel anguish for them.
It was unknown if it was because of the black thorn symbol, but his misery had abated. His face felt as if slapped by an invisible hand repeatedly. His face was red and swollen, and his teeth were loose. He could hardly speak.
Just as another round of attacks were about to descend, Lumian's vision blurred and he glimpsed a wilderness.
In the distance loomed a mountain range, and close by stretched a grassy wilderness.
Two demon-like creatures with goat horns hauled a dark red, conch-like carriage from afar, hastening before Lumian and company.
Seated in the carriage was a woman in emerald robes and laurel wreath. Chestnut locks swept up, hazel eyes bright and watery. Dignified and noble, reminiscent of Madame Pualis matured.
She kept her pledge to proffer aid? Lumian startled, then delighted as the invisible force assailed them not.
Somehow he knew the woman before him was not quite Madame Pualis. Or rather, not Madame Pualis precisely. More an unearthly construct Madame Pualis had fashioned by dint of will.
Lumian chose to call her Madame Night.
Unlike his Paramita encounter, Madame Pualis grasped an oak branch mistletoe-wreathed at its tip in one hand, a jadeite bowl of sparkling liquid in the other.
Madame Pualis dipped the oak branch in the bowl and sprinkled them.
After the third sprinkle, Lumian saw his chest wound heal apace. The swelling receded swiftly, and no more was he pinned immobile to the wall.
Leah, Ryan and Valentine wholly healed, no trace of cruel injuries.
"What attacked us?" Lumian asked, figuring nothing ventured, nothing lost.
Madame Pualis, seated in the crimson carriage, replied

superciliously, "There's a hint of Sufferer taint on you now. Thankfully, it's minor. Otherwise, you'd have to restart the loop."
"Sufferer taint? What's that supposed to mean?" Lumian exchanged puzzled looks with Ryan and the others.
Madame Pualis replied gently, "That's all I know."
"Then do you know what happened to the dead Warlock and owl in the cemetery?" Lumian pressed.
Madame Pualis glanced at him. "If I'd known, things wouldn't have turned out this way. I'd originally planned to rule this place, but now I have no choice but to leave."
Rule this place? Alarm bells rang in Lumian's head. Falling into a loop might not be the worst fate.
Aurore and I have no idea how many babies we'd have if Madame Pualis gets her way!
Compared to that, getting looped and destroyed at any moment doesn't seem so bad.
At least we'd die unadulterated!
Madame Pualis glanced at them but said nothing more. She had her pitch-black demon beasts pull her conch carriage into the wilderness.
By the time she disappeared from Lumian and the others' sight, the wilderness was gone.
Just then, they realized they were still in the basement. Half of them were on the stairs, the other half by the wooden door.
If not for the blood and fallen nails on the ground and walls, they'd have thought they'd experienced a hyper-realistic illusion.
"Let's get out of here first." Ryan quickly regained his senses and told Valentine, "Get rid of any traces we left."
Valentine nodded and conjured illusory golden flames to burn the blood and nails away.
The four of them faced no further attacks on their way back to the cathedral.
It was unclear if the Sufferer taint had been expended or if Madame Pualis had wiped it out.
Just as Lumian was about to leave through the side door, he suddenly spotted the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, standing dazed outside the room where sleeping servants had been stowed.
Was this fellow back from filling his stomach? Lumian was about to avoid him when Michel, with his curly brown hair and delicate features, suddenly turned and saw them.
Ryan was poised to knock this guy out when Michel Garrigue asked with an unnaturally cheerful smile, "Here to pray? Need a confession?"
Everyone else in the cathedral has collapsed, but you're concerned

with confessions? Lumian looked at Michel as if he were mad. Compared to before, this guy's abnormality was glaringly obvious!

Chapter 80: 80 Joint Investigation Team

80 Joint Investigation Team

Leah sensed Michel's abnormality and turned to Ryan, asking with her eyes if she should knock him out.

At this moment, Lumian spoke up. "*Is the padre not here?*"

Michel's eyes lit up, unable to hide his excitement. "The padre is resting. You can pray to me."

His face was filled with pleading.

Lumian hesitated, obviously uneasy, before reluctantly saying, "Fine."

Seeing Michel's elated expression, Lumian turned to Leah and the others, feigning annoyance.

"What's wrong with you lot? Coming to the cathedral to pray is what any true believer would do. *What is there to be afraid of?*"

What he really meant was that they had already escaped the basement without getting caught. *Why worry now?* As believers of the Eternal Blazing Sun, it was perfectly normal for them to come to the cathedral to pray. Using a side door was a trivial matter. As for the padre and his lackeys taking an extended lunch, what did that have to do with them?

Lumian knew such excuses would only fool dimwits, but they should placate the padre, at least for now. The padre wouldn't expose them until Ryan's group tried reporting the irregularities to the higher-ups and put an end to Cordu's depravities.

As long as Leah and the others continued strolling around the village, casually chatting with people as if they hadn't found anything incriminating in the cathedral's basement, the padre would be content to maintain the status quo.

Add to that, Ryan had demolished their underground altar. It would take time for them to restore it. Lumian estimated the padre wouldn't gain any boons for at least a couple of days, if not until after Lent began.

By then, it wouldn't matter if the padre suspected them or not. Appearing "normal" was the most pressing concern.

Upon hearing Lumian's words, Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue vigorously nodded.

"Absolutely! No matter your past sins, if you pray sincerely and repent, God will forgive you."

Is that so? What if the padre repented to the Eternal Blazing Sun and confessed that I had strayed long ago, believing in an evil god? Now, I want to return to the righteous path? Lumian appeared pious as he strode to the altar, but he didn't buy it.

Michel hastened ahead, seeming poised to take flight in his zeal.

Leah couldn't help but glance sideways at Valentine, seeing his complicated expression at the fanatical clergyman. This should have earned Valentine's praise, but he knew the deputy padre was clearly deranged.
Redirecting her gaze from Valentine, Leah rushed to Lumian's side and whispered in his ear, "Did you consider that half those present don't believe in the Eternal Blazing Sun?"
"You're not?" Lumian seemed genuinely surprised.
Not because he was perceptive and grasped her hint, but of the five there, aside from the unhinged deputy padre, Valentine was certainly one of the remaining four. Lumian himself barely counted as half.
Leah nodded slightly, her bells chiming.
She smiled and whispered, "Ryan hails from the Machinery Hivemind. I'm from Bureau 8, we don't belong to the Eternal Blazing Sun Church."
Lumian had heard his sister mention that the Machinery Hivemind was on par with the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition. It was a branch of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery dealing with matters concerning those from beyond. Bureau 8's full name was Bureau 8 under the Intis Intelligence and Homeland Security Committee. It was the Republic's most official organization in the domain of the Beyonders.
"Weren't you sent by the Church?" Lumian asked curiously, finding a chair and sitting down.
Leah sat beside him, smiling thinly.
"Too many dangerous run-ins with those from beyond have happened at country borders in recent years, especially in disputed territories. When Cordu called for help, the higher-ups decided to set up a joint task force to get into Cordu, figure out what's really going down, and give the best recommendation for how to handle it.
"Who knew that this place..."
She shook her head, seeming at a loss for words while her bells chimed.
The strangeness and horror of this place was beyond her imagination.
At times she felt Valentine was right to suggest reporting everything and requesting Cordu's destruction.
But she wasn't ready to die yet. She had to choke back her professional instincts and morals.
At that moment, Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue picked up the book on the altar and glanced at the four praying.
Leah then crossed her arms over her chest and bowed her head.

"..." Lumian was a little stunned.
And you claim not to believe in the Eternal Blazing Sun!
Leah sensed his gaze and turned, flashing him a wry grin.
"God won't fault me for posing as a sheep of another flock during a crusade. If you doubt it, look..." She jerked her chin to the other side.
Ryan, hailing from Machinery Hivemind, folded his arms over his chest in a pious fashion.
So your moral compass possesses flexibility when questing...
Lumian longed to jibe Leah and Ryan, but worship had commenced. He couldn't lag behind.
After adopting a reverent mien and closing his eyes, the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue, riffled through the Holy Bible and intoned gravely, "God spake, 'Let there be light,' and there was light..."
Lumian suddenly felt a surge of nostalgia as he listened to the familiar sermon in the cathedral.
Though he used to just go with the flow and float through the service, whispering and gazing around, he now longed for the simplicity of the past—even if he had to pray with the greatest devotion.
Even the unpleasant events that had once annoyed him were now a source of comfort.
By the time Lumian and the others left the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral, the padre and servants were still knocked out cold.
Ryan glanced toward the castle and sighed emotionally.
"That woman's far more powerful than I realized."
"*How powerful?*" Lumian asked, curious.
Ryan deliberated a moment. "It's like she's touched the threshold of godhood, yet not quite."
You seem to have said something yet not quite... If Lumian didn't need Ryan and the others recently, he'd have spoken his mind.
However, thanks to his extensive knowledge of mysticism, he could roughly guess what Ryan meant by "the threshold of godhood."
Sequence 4! The beginnings of a demigod!
He pondered a moment.
"I think Pualis seemed off when she appeared as Madame Night."
He'd told them about Madame Night in Paramita.
"I got the same impression," Leah said with a smile. "Like a botched patchwork monster."
Ryan nodded.
"We have an understanding of Madame Night to some extent. In the border region between Intis and Feynapotter, similar incidents have occurred frequently in recent years. Some call her Madame

Night, some call her Madam Härt, some call her The Benevolent, and some call her The Vile. But so far, we haven't caught any of them. We still lack a systematic grasp of them.
"Yes, this is the first time I've heard of Paramita."
Leah strode to the edge of the village square with a tinkling gait. "Something about Paramita occurred to me from the description."
"What?" Lumian never felt embarrassed to inquire.
Leah glanced southward. "In Feynapotter's Church of Earth Mother, there's a saying: 'The soul returns to the land.'"
The soul returns to the land... Images of the wilderness and wandering undead surfaced in Lumian's mind.
He had to admit Leah's association made sense.
Arriving at the elm tree at the village entrance, Ryan surveyed the area and remarked,
"Let's not provoke that madame further. Regarding escaping the loop, even if she doesn't provide aid, she won't become an enemy. We just need to monitor her movements and see if we can utilize the specific temporal node she mentioned."
Wasn't it because you clearly couldn't defeat her if you didn't provoke her? Lumian suppressed his mouth, ready to retort.
He then asked Valentine, "*How many minutes?*"
He worried that if he mistimed, his sister would trigger the loop and restart everything.
Valentine extracted a gold pocket watch and popped it open.
"Ten minutes remaining."
"That's good..." Lumian sighed in relief and waved at Ryan and the others. "I'm going to search for Aurore. If you've nothing else to do, help me locate Sybil's husband, Jean Maury. Investigate who's spreading the rumor that the horoscopes are about to change and everyone will usher in good fortune. If you discover anything, come to my house to find me. Goodbye, my cabbages!"
That was what Leah and the others had planned to do, so no one objected.
.....
Lumian fell into deep thought as he bade farewell to the Joint Investigation Team and walked to the agreed-upon spot at the edge of the village.
After completing his exploration of the cathedral's underground, he had a darn good hunch about the anomaly in Cordu.
The ones responsible for the loop were definitely the padre's group. They'd been secretly worshiping an evil god for at least six months and had secretly sacrificed quite a few foreigners under the cathedral in exchange for loads of boons.
Before Lent, the padre, Pons Bénet, and their lot had received a

boon using the three Beyonders that Shepherd Pierre Berry had brought back—or at least one of them. The former instantly became a pretty powerful Beyonder. Hence, they kicked off a grand ritual at the start of Lent.

On the twelfth night, in the final stage of the ritual, the hidden being with the name of Inevitability would accept the large-scale sacrifice and complete something that the padre and company had prayed for. But at that moment, something unexpected happened. The ritual failed to complete, and the power involving the past, present, and future dissipated, bringing about a time loop.

As for what unexpected event had occurred, Lumian recalled something the mysterious lady had once said: "You belong to the group of individuals who are on the brink of being corrupted. Luckily, the mark left by that great existence was activated, and the corresponding power descended upon you, sealing the source of corruption and establishing balance..."

Chapter 81: Key

Beside the serpentine river outside Cordu Village, under the piercing sunlight, Aurore, clad in a casual blue dress, sat on the ground with her eyes closed, listening to Lumian's conjectures and analysis.

She remained silent for a while, as if lost in thought.

After nearly a minute of contemplation, Aurore spoke, "If something truly occurred during the ritual on the twelfth night, causing the hidden entity's power to disperse and trigger a time loop in Cordu and its surroundings, I believe that the people and even the spirits in this area at that time wouldn't have been spared."

"What do you mean?" Lumian, also seated on the ground, struggled to grasp his sister's reasoning.

Aurore elaborated, "I mean that it's both power and corruption. Once it disperses, everyone in this area will endure the corruption on relatively equal footing. Only those bearing the black thorn symbol or under the protection of other high-level entities can barely remain unaffected.

"Consider this: isn't it like a dam bursting, flooding the entire place up to the rafters? Unless a boat was prepared beforehand, we'd undoubtedly be drenched."

Lumian envisioned such a scene and hesitantly inquired, "So, does that mean everyone in the village has been tainted by the dissipating power, effectively becoming a component of the loop?"

By "component," he didn't mean participating in or being affected by the loop. More precisely, people became part of the loop's structure.

Aurore, her eyes still closed and her blonde hair tied up, gently nodded.

"I suspect that not only will killing the padre result in a reset, but also slaying other villagers in Cordu will trigger a similar effect. It's like trying to dismantle the loop's components. There will surely be a reaction to such disruption."

"But we just killed the midwife yesterday afternoon..." Lumian trailed off before finishing his sentence.

Suddenly, numerous thoughts raced through his mind, and he hesitantly proposed, "Is it because the people in the castle are protected by other high-level entities?

"Is that why Madame Pualis claimed she could leave the loop at a specific moment?

"She wasn't tainted by that power. She's not part of the loop. She's affected, but she can exploit loopholes or seize opportunities to

escape?"
Aurore sighed softly. "That's why she said she can't save us or take us with her. We've already been corrupted and are fused with the loop."
At this, she managed a bitter smile. "Or rather, we're already dead. We're merely existing in the form of loop components.
"No wonder that mysterious lady said that if she forcibly ended the loop, everyone here would die. That's because we are the forcibly dispersed loop itself."
Lumian fell silent. He yearned to contradict his sister and argue that they shouldn't be so pessimistic, but her words aligned with the mysterious woman's.
What he couldn't comprehend all this time was that, given the woman's ability to freely enter and exit the loop and her audacity to mention the hidden entity, even if she couldn't break the loop without causing any harm, it ought to be simple for her to safeguard two or three people and facilitate their departure.
Now, there was a more plausible and disheartening explanation to this conundrum.
After a few seconds, Lumian found a counterargument.
"Ava, Reimund, and Naroka are all dead, but their deaths didn't cause the loop to restart."
Aurore, her eyes still closed, offered a complex smile. "Perhaps they died before the loop began, so without participating in the ritual on the twelfth night, they weren't tainted."
Her implication was clear. In the timeline before the loop transpired, Naroka had perished before Lent, while Ava and Reimund had been sacrificed during the celebration. They didn't survive until the twelfth night and were not part of the loop.
She paused for a moment and continued, "Jean Maury, who vanished today, might be in a similar situation. According to normal developments, he should have discovered something abnormal after Lent and before the twelfth night. He wanted to escape, but was silenced. Our investigation merely expedited this event.
"The only thing I don't understand is that Reimund's corpse was sacrificed, right? He shouldn't have been in the loop from the start..."
Hearing his sister's words, Lumian instantly recalled the events beneath the cathedral.
The invisible figure in the black robe was composed of Reimund and the others' spirits!
Lumian combined his knowledge of mysticism and attempted to speculate.

"Maybe the Lenten sacrifice wasn't made directly to the hidden entity, but to the altar. It's part of the twelfth night's ritual, so Reimund's spirit appeared beneath the cathedral.
"His body is useless, but before the loop began, Pons Bénet and his associates could leave Cordu. To stop those downstream from finding the body and alerting the higher-ups, they might retrieve it after completing the ritual of sending it downriver.
"Once the loop started, the power had limits. It can't cover the area where Pons Bénet and the others recovered the body. They're affected by the corruption in their bodies and won't consider leaving this area."
Aurore pondered for a moment and nodded in agreement.
"In the past few days of the loop, other than you, the three foreigners, and Madame Pualis and her subordinates, none of the villagers have thought of leaving Cordu to hunt or gather wild fruit.
"If you hadn't reminded me, I would've been the same."
Aurore revealed a desolate, self-deprecating smile.
"We're already a group of monsters. We're barely surviving as humans by relying on the loop."
"No, there must be a way for redemption. That lady said it exists!" Lumian interrupted his sister's self-pity.
Aurore exhaled slowly and stated, "Can't you let your sister be vulnerable for a few minutes?"
She continued, "Based on this line of thought, we can only rely on ourselves. Breaking the cycle with external forces is equivalent to killing us."
Lumian sighed. "Unfortunately, there's no way to verify this speculation at the moment. We can only confirm it on the twelfth night."
"We can verify it, but it'll waste a lot of our time. Besides, I can't do it," Aurore replied.
That's true... Lumian roughly grasped his sister's meaning and plan: Kill a villager not currently on the padre's team to see if it would trigger a reboot. If it did, they could find a way to lure one of the three foreigners into a death trap and see if it triggered the cycle. If not, it would validate Aurore and Lumian's guesses. Most people in Cordu Village had been corrupted and were part of the loop. Those who came later were only affected by the loop and had a chance to escape it with the help of loopholes or external forces.
However, that would squander many of the past few days, and Aurore wasn't the type to kill innocents, especially those they had a good partnership with.
Lumian had no moral qualms in this regard. From his perspective,

dying in the loop wasn't true death. There was a high chance of only residual problems. That was much better than being trapped in the loop.
Of course, if he really wanted to do so, he wouldn't try to murder Leah and the others. Instead, he would reason with the three foreigners.
With Valentine's fanaticism and piety, he was confident he could persuade him to commit suicide.
The siblings exchanged glances and fell silent, unsure of what to say.
After a while, Lumian changed the subject.
"Grande Soeur, what do you think is the key to ending the loop from the inside?"
Aurore had been pondering this question. As she thought, she said, "We can't just end the loop from the inside. We have to use this situation to remove the corruption in everyone's bodies. Otherwise, what's the difference between this and suicide?
"Yes, according to my previous guess, something happened to the ritual, causing the entire village to enter a loop. And the reason an accident occurred was that you bear the mark of that great entity. It was activated and sealed the heavy corruption in your heart..."
Aurore assessed her brother as she spoke.
Lumian instantly grasped her meaning.
"You mean I'm the key to ending the cycle?"
Aurore nodded. "The source of the accident lies with you, so naturally, the key to ending the cycle is with you.
"Of course, this is only a guess. Perhaps the key to the loop is the vessel that will bear the power of the hidden entity's descent during the twelfth night's ritual. For example, the padre or someone else..."
Aurore suddenly fell silent and looked at her brother for a few seconds.
"Could these two speculations be equivalent? You are the vessel? Otherwise, as an auxiliary sacrifice and contaminant, even if something unexpected happened, the ritual wouldn't have failed disastrously and its power dissipated uncontrollably."
Uh... The more Lumian thought about it, the more he felt that his sister's guess made sense.
He muttered to himself, "That black thorn mark on my chest is darker than the padre's was...
"So when the priest tried to deal with me, he showed signs of losing control, allowing me to kill him...
"Therefore, that mysterious lady never said how to end this loop. She just told me to explore the dream ruins and figure out their

secrets..."
Aurore got a little pumped. "Yeah, that's probably a clue!
"Maybe the dream ruins stem from the corruption in your body or are closely linked to it. So you can rely on the black thorn mark to take down every monster you run into there.
"Once you unlock the secrets, you can rein in or safely tap into the power in your body to some extent and siphon off the corruption from everyone in Cordu. The loop will break on its own.
"Yeah, maybe this can only be done at certain times. Like at the ritual on the twelfth night."
Lumian leapt to his feet. "I'm heading back to dream now!"
"No rush." Aurore slowly sat up. "Aren't you hurt? Aren't you going to rest?"
Lumian patted his chest.
"The liquid Madame Pualis sprinkled healed all my wounds and restored my spirituality."
"Oh, was that pomelo sago... child-giving Guanyin..." Aurore muttered.
"Huh?" Lumian didn't get it at all. His sister was speaking a totally foreign language.
Aurore smiled with her eyes closed.
"What I mean is, go home, fill your belly, take a nap, and explore your dreams!"

Chapter 82: Dream Divination

In the semi-subterranean two-story building, Lumian and Aurore quietly consumed their belated lunch.

The mutton, which should have been succulent and tender, tasted utterly bland on their palates.

Barely satiated, Lumian was about to clear the table when tinkling sounds reached his ears.

"Leah and the others?" He glanced towards the door.

Aurore, too, sensed something. She set down her cutlery and fixed her gaze upon the entrance.

Moments later, the doorbell chimed.

Without hesitation, Lumian abandoned his seat and strode towards the door, peering at the visitors through the peephole.

It was indeed Leah, accompanied by the other two foreigners.

Valentine had finally changed his attire. Previously engulfed in flames due to the Sufferer's aura, Madame Pualis had tended to his wounds, but his scorched clothing was beyond repair.

Lumian swung the door open and greeted them with a warm smile.

"My cabbages, you already miss me?

"Oh, you actually can change clothes?"

Valentine had swapped his white vest, blue tweed jacket, and black trousers for a yellow vest, black formal jacket, and dark pants. White fabric flowers adorned Leah's white cashmere dress—one large and two small—concealing signs of damage with impressive sewing skills. As for Ryan, Lumian couldn't detect any difference in his outfit or evidence of his previous injuries. Lumian suspected the man had packed at least two identical sets of clothing.

"We've gathered information on those two matters," Ryan replied coolly, his eyes hinting that details would follow once they were inside.

Lumian sought Aurore's approval before fully opening the door and ushering the three investigators in.

This was the first time Ryan and his colleagues had met Aurore, and they exchanged polite introductions.

"About the impending horoscope shift, and the villagers' supposed good fortune, it's tentatively confirmed that the padre orchestrated the rumors," Ryan revealed, wasting no time as they settled around the dining table. "But I don't think it's that simple. The methods and rhetoric resemble those of a village witch. Under normal circumstances, the padre wouldn't devise such a scheme."

Village witches were part-time fortune-tellers who frequented small towns and villages.

Aurore nodded thoughtfully.
"Could it be the influence of the deceased Warlock? Hmm, a way to lure villagers into secretly worshiping the evil god."
"And they believed it so easily?" Valentine seethed.
His expression conveyed utter disbelief at the gullibility of Cordu's inhabitants.
It's all because believing in the Eternal Blazing Sun doesn't alleviate their poverty, and they're still oppressed by the padre and the administrator... Aurore held her tongue, fearing a confrontation with Valentine.
She could envision villagers experiencing tangible benefits from the padre and his followers after turning to the evil god, such as reduced contributions to the Eternal Blazing Sun or protection from Pons Bénet's harassment. They could even scare their irritating neighbors using the thug's name. In short, their lives would genuinely improve, giving them hope and fueling their devotion.
Nevertheless, Aurore didn't condone their actions. While the government and Church primarily sought money, the cults demanded lives.
Ignoring Valentine's question, Lumian 'helpfully' suggested, "You should ask the villagers yourself and thoroughly investigate the cause of their wavering faith. If you uncover the truth, I believe the papacy will hold you in high regard."
The papacy referred to the Eternal Blazing Sun's pope, a title shared by many church leaders. Lumian had recently learned this after perusing the materials Aurore had procured.
Valentine fell silent, evidently intrigued.
Aurore shifted the focus to Ryan.
"Did you locate Sybil's husband, Jean Maury?"
Ryan glanced at Leah, prompting her to speak.
Leah nodded and said, "We infiltrated Jean Maury's residence and obtained one of his belongings. Using this item, I performed a dream divination."
Dream divination... Aurore nodded, unsurprised.
As Lumian recounted their exploration of the castle the day before, Aurore had already pieced together their pathways and approximate Sequences based on the performance of the three official investigators.
Clearly, Leah belonged to the more common Seer pathway in Intis. Moreover, she wasn't a Sequence 9 Seer or Sequence 8 Clown, but at least a Sequence 7 Magician. This could be inferred from her Beyonder powers like Paper Figurine Substitutes and Damage Transfer, as well as her skills in divination and acrobatics.

Aurore wasn't certain if Leah had reached Sequence 6, as her knowledge of the pathway's subsequent stages was limited.
Valentine belonged to one of the main pathways controlled by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church: the Sun. Likewise, he wasn't a Sequence 9 Bard or Sequence 8 Light Suppliant. Aurore deduced from his Holy Light Summoning, Holy Water Creation, and Sun Halo that he was a Sequence 7 Solar High Priest. Furthermore, he likely hadn't reached Sequence 6 Notary, as he hadn't displayed the corresponding abilities.
Ryan's Beyonder powers were uncommon in Intis; he was likely a Warrior.
This pathway was primarily controlled by the Church of the God of Combat from the Feysac Empire in the north. However, in the past five to six years, numerous Beyonders and Beyonder creatures of the Warrior pathway had appeared in various countries.
Several members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society had either actively or passively chosen this pathway.
According to Aurore's knowledge, this was also known as the Giant pathway. Sequence 9 was Warrior, Sequence 8 was Pugilist, and Sequence 7 was Weapon Master. Sequence 6 was a level that experienced a qualitative shift compared to previous Sequences. They were called Dawn Paladins, who possessed the strength of Giants and could create Sunrise Gleam in a certain area to eliminate illusions and negative or evil energies.
They could also condense full-body armor known as Dawn and weapons they were proficient with. Among them, the most potent was the two-handed broadsword, the Sword of Dawn. With the Sword of Dawn, they could unleash their Sequence's most powerful attack—Hurricane of Light. This could annihilate the human body, exterminate vengeful spirits, and even wound evil spirits.
Considering Ryan's performance, Aurore believed he was a Sequence 6 Dawn Paladin, though he probably hadn't become a Sequence 5 Guardian yet.
Aurore had always felt that these three official investigators were on par with her. Now, she realized that each of them was stronger than the last. If she wasn't prepared, she wouldn't stand a chance in a one-on-one battle.
It was well-known that in the official categorization, Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 were considered Low-Sequence Beyonders. They had some unique abilities compared to ordinary people, but their flaws were apparent. Sequence 7 to Sequence 5 were Mid-Sequence, where they began to possess extraordinary powers. Sequence 4 and above belonged to the demigod domain, making them worthy of the title 'High-Sequence Beyonders.'

According to some members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who had infiltrated official organizations, when dealing with ordinary Beyonder matters, a team of one Mid-Sequence and two Low-Sequence Beyonders would be assembled to carry out the first round of investigations. They would then deploy more high-level forces depending on the situation. This time, facing the anomalies in Cordu, the Intis officials had sent three Mid-Sequence Beyonders. They weren't taking the situation lightly.
However, even this joint investigation team didn't seem to be enough for Cordu.
Aurore had shared all this information with Lumian, and the siblings listened intently as Leah continued.
"In the dream divination, I saw Shepherd Pierre Berry. He emerged with a few nails wrapped in hair and stuffed them into the hay," Leah described the scene in the simplest terms.
Haystacks... nails and hair... Lumian instantly recalled his discovery under the guidance of the three sheep.
He had also found some nails wrapped in hair in the haystack of the Berrys' sheep pen.
He frowned and said, "Are those Jean Maury's nails and hair? Was he killed by Shepherd Pierre Berry at the Berrys' place?"
Aurore nodded.
"Originally, the custom of hiding one's nails and hair outside the house was to prevent it from affecting one's family horoscope and luck. It was limited to family members with a bad reputation or who committed suicide, as well as those who were murdered by their relatives. But because Jean Maury was killed at the shepherd's house, Pierre Berry still carefully cut off the other party's nails and took some hair to hide in the haystack outside the house?"
"No wonder it was there before... That must be from their previous victim. *How many people have they killed in secret?*" Lumian scoffed under his breath. "At this point, he's still worried about messing up his horoscope and luck?"
"Imbecile!" Valentine cursed aloud.
They had been briefed by Lumian earlier and knew about the three sheep, the haystack, and the old folk customs they represented.
After discussing for a while and confirming they wouldn't try anything else for now, Leah and the others bid Lumian and Aurore farewell and returned to Ol' Tavern.
The siblings didn't mention their speculations at noon, afraid it might deter the official investigators from cracking this case open from the inside. After all, they could only be affected and might escape with outside help.

After clearing the table and helping wipe it down, Lumian returned to his room and lay on the bed.
With conflicting thoughts and many unanswered questions, sleep eluded him for a long time. He relied on some meditation techniques to slowly calm his mind and finally drifted off.
.....
In the room shrouded in faint gray fog, Lumian opened his eyes and sat up straight.
He lowered his gaze and looked at his chest. His vision seemed to cut through the thin cotton shirt and flesh, allowing him to see the black thorn tattoo and the bluish-black pattern underneath.
Is this the root cause of this endless loop? Lumian thought.
The black thorn symbol was at the heart of the issue, and the bluish-black pattern brought protection from that ominous force, allowing Cordu to be salvaged.
All of this could be traced back nearly six years.
Lumian remembered clearly that he had still been a street rat at the time. He had barely survived by relying on seeming unthreatening due to his young age and extreme ruthlessness.
Then, one day, he met a dying old man.
Maybe it was because he had picked up some street smarts, or maybe because the old man reminded him of his only family, Pépé, who had raised him until his early teens but sadly passed on, Lumian chose to lend a hand.
Though he ultimately failed to save the old man's life, Lumian still sent him to the crematorium and buried him in a public grave.
He had found the bluish-black symbol on the old man's corpse during this. From then on, he often dreamed of the vast expanse of gray fog.
His luck also turned sour, and he began struggling to scavenge enough food. Thankfully, he met Aurore not long after.

Chapter 83: A Sudden Encounter

Phew... Lumian exhaled steadily and reined in his racing thoughts.
He slung his shotgun over his shoulder and clipped on his axe. Leaving the semi-subterranean two-story building perched on the edge of the wild, he strode into the dream ruins.
Tracking a familiar route through the dense forest, he crept deeper into the tangle of collapsed houses towards the hulking "peak" of crumbling red stone.
Thick fog clung to the somber sky, weeds rasped at his feet. The whole world was darkened, bleak.
Soon Lumian left familiar ground behind, plunging into the heart of the ruins.
He scanned the ruins constantly, cataloging every trace, theorizing how each might be useful in a fight.
Caution slowed his progress but hunting taught caution and carefulness above all.
Finally, a clue. Fresh footprints, seemingly human. Tucked behind a jumble of rubble at the road's edge, cunningly concealed.
This one knows how to move unseen... Capable of eliminating traces to a certain extent... Lumian observed for a while and made a preliminary judgment.
He suspected that it was something similar to the shotgun monster, perhaps bearing clues to Sequence 8 of the Hunter's pathway.
Experience and Aurore's speculation told him three types of monsters likely infested these ruins.
The first bore no boons or Beyonder characteristics, like Noodle Man or the mouth-orifice monster, probably under the sway of that hidden being called Inevitability.
The second displayed Beyonder characteristics but no boons, typified by the shotgun monster. The black thorn on Lumian's chest would suppress them. It meant that they were tainted by some hidden corruption, resulting in them turning into monsters.
The third showed no boons or Beyonder characteristics, mere humans or creatures twisted into horrors like the skinless monster he first found.
Whether monsters with both boons and Beyonder characteristics existed, he and Aurore suspected so but lacked proof.
Therefore, it was very likely that a monster with Hunter traits possessed Beyonder characteristics!
Lumian tracked the footprints and discovered two lethal traps along the way, validating his hypothesis.
Had he not tread carefully or lacked his Hunter abilities, he might

have become prey instead of predator.
Soon, the footprints grew fresher.
This meant a high probability of encountering his target if he pressed on.
Rather than rushing to "greet" his target, Lumian circled around and located an ideal ambush spot.
Then he began to dance.
Amid the intangible melody, he stamped with powerful steps and spun in a gentle, graceful semicircle, reenacting Noodle Man's strange, mysterious sacrificial dance.
His skills were rough and rusty, but with his Dancer power, Lumian felt his chest heat up.
After undoing his shirt and confirming the black thorn symbol's materialization, Lumian climbed into the collapsed house's center and settled into his chosen hiding place.
He quickly glanced into the distance and spied a figure digging a trap.
It was certainly a "person," but its whole body was charred black, and crimson flames blazed on its surface endlessly.
No way it's a Pyromaniac, right? I've landed a big one... Lumian was both thrilled and vexed.
He was thrilled that the primary ingredient matching a Sequence 8 Provoker had appeared. What troubled him was that it was much stronger than the prey he had anticipated.
Pyromaniac was a Sequence 7 of the Hunter pathway. According to Aurore, it was a Sequence that had undergone a qualitative change. Its ancient name was Fire Mage.
Lumian believed that with him being a Hunter, a Dancer, and possessing the black thorn symbol, as long as he wasn't careless, hunting a Provoker monster shouldn't be an issue. However, he wasn't confident against a Sequence 7 Pyromaniac.
As long as the monster attacked him from afar, it might not be weakened by the black thorn symbol!
After some thought, Lumian decided to retreat.
He planned to devise an effective plan to handle the flaming monster after setting up a targeted trap.
His initial idea was to head home and dance the dance that could summon the strange objects in the surrounding area and see what kind of adverse effects it would have on him when allowing the remnant spirit of the mouth-orifice monster to possess him.
If it wasn't severe and acceptable, he could borrow the other party's ability in the future, such as Invisibility.
Lumian wasn't too worried about the aftereffects of being possessed or whether the vengeful spirit would be willing to leave

after successfully possessing him.
In any case, he was in the dream ruins. As long as he didn't die on the spot, he could recover fully after returning to reality to rest.
Just as Lumian made a move, the flaming monster suddenly raised its charred face and bulging eyes, looking right at him.
Not good! Lumian thought. Instead of climbing, he jumped down from his hiding spot.
Almost instantly, a massive fireball smashed into where he'd been, sending bricks and rocks flying, erupting in flames.
Lumian staggered in a sorry state. When he crashed, he could barely control his body. All he could do was tumble and roll to cushion the impact.
If not for Dancer's extraordinary flexibility, his muscles and ligaments would have torn from the twisted movement.
By the time Lumian stood up again, the flaming monster had already materialized atop the collapsed building. Phantasmal fire ravens coalesced from flames around it.
Upon seeing this, Lumian felt as if surrounded by soldiers with guns trained on him.
Without hesitation, he bolted towards the collapsed building where the flaming monster stood.
Faced with such a scene, he felt the only way to turn defeat into victory was by using the black thorn symbol on his chest.
And this seemed to require closing the distance!
Thud thud thud!
As Lumian ran, half the Fire Ravens descended from the sky and detonated behind him, causing heat waves to surge and explosions to reverberate.
The remaining illusory Fire Ravens banked and locked onto their running target.
At that moment, Lumian arrived at the bottom of the collapsed building, no more than five meters from the flaming monster.
In the next second, the charred monster enveloped in crimson flames froze. The remaining Fire Ravens around it were instantly snuffed out.
It's working! Just as joy flooded Lumian's heart, the flaming monster pivoted and fled from the collapsed building in the opposite direction.
"Hey, don't run!" Lumian blurted subconsciously.
He circled around the ruins before him and chased after the flaming monster.
Lumian chased it for two blocks. As the monster was too swift, he completely lost sight of it.
At this moment, the searing sensation in Lumian's chest vanished.

He had no choice but to stop and adjust his breathing, gearing himself up to track the footprints and watch out for traps.
As he panted, Lumian's gaze swept around and suddenly froze.
Not far away, a figure loomed in the doorway of a half-collapsed building.
The figure wore a black robe with a hood. Aside from that, it seemed ordinary enough, except it had three faces on its head.
The front face was an old man's. Milky eyes, scraggly brows, wrinkled as a prune.
The left was in its prime, chiseled and stubbled, icy blue eyes gleaming.
The right was a child's—one less than five years old—smooth and round, blue eyes wide with innocence and ignorance.
The three-faced monster! That three-faced monster! Lumian was truly frightened.
As he was chasing after the flaming monster, he'd wandered deep into the ruins and stumbled on the three-faced monster!
Despite mastering the mysterious Sacrificial Dance and activating the black thorn symbol, Lumian had no intention of using the three-faced monster as target practice. His instincts screamed that this foe was lethal. According to the mysterious lady's words, even weakened by the black thorn symbol, the monster could easily slay a weak hunter.
Lumian's plan was to steer clear of the three-faced monster's territory and practice on other monsters. He wanted to test the black thorn mark's power against enemies of varying might before deciding whether to hunt the three-faced monster.
Unexpectedly, the monster left its domain and stumbled upon Lumian!
Eh... would a little dance of contrition perhaps appease you? Lumian thought, taking an involuntary step back.
At the entrance of the crumbling building, the three-faced monster in a black robe and hood retreated a step.
Lumian spun around.
The three-faced monster mirrored him.
Lumian bolted.
The three-faced monster fled as well.
Lumian, who had meant to flee and try dancing, ran a few paces before sensing something amiss.
He halted and glanced back. By chance, he saw the three-faced monster retreating.
"..." Lumian stared, stunned.
After a moment, Lumian vaguely grasped the situation. He touched his face and muttered, "Am I that scary?"

The three-faced monster's actions reminded him of their first encounter.

Back then, Lumian stole a glance at the three-faced monster and cowered in terror, praying to the Eternal Blazing Sun to conceal him. Though the three-faced monster clearly peered toward his hiding spot, it didn't seem to notice anything. Instead, it took the initiative to retreat further away.

So it wasn't the Eternal Blazing Sun that shielded me, nor was I very fortunate. Did the three-faced monster sense my "specialness" and flee? Lumian nodded thoughtfully, hazarding a guess.

In the dream ruins, can monsters of a certain level directly perceive my "specialness" without me half-activating the black thorn symbol?

Chapter 84: Dirk

Lumian broke the monsters in the dream ruins into three levels based on how the flaming monster and the three-faced monster reacted when they encountered him.

The lowest level ones acted on instinct alone. As soon as they saw him, they would attack. When he activated or partially activated the black thorn symbol on his chest, they would immediately give up and submit fully to his mercy.

The higher level ones would hunt him down before he partially activated the black thorn symbol. After he finished the sacrificial dance, they would cunningly opt to escape. But they couldn't sense the existence of the black thorn symbol beyond five meters. The flaming monster likely only remained in fear and associated the corrupting aura from the seal with Lumian.

At a certain level, Lumian didn't even need to activate or partially activate the black thorn symbol on his chest, nor did they need to be within five meters of Lumian for them to obviously feel his "specialness" and show conspicuous dread.

Were there any other levels above these three? Lumian felt there should be at least one, at most three. For instance, the kind that wouldn't fear the partially activated black thorn symbol so much that they immediately fled. They would persist in attacking despite significant weakening. Or for example, the kind that were so high in level that they wouldn't react to the black thorn symbol at all...

Therefore, while Lumian was delighted that he could scare off the three-faced monster and seemed capable of doing whatever he wanted in the dream ruins, he didn't dare to be careless.

Disregarding terrifying beings that might be higher in level than the three-faced monster, just the flaming monster could incinerate him to ashes without being impacted by the partially activated black thorn symbol with its powerful long-range attack.

With this in mind, Lumian hesitated for a moment before stealthily delving deeper into the dream ruins along the three-faced monster's escape route. He planned to scout the blood-colored "peak" and surrounding area today to gather information for the subsequent unlocking of the dream's secret.

Along the way, he proceeded to a relatively concealed area less easily discovered, on guard against any monsters that might suddenly burst out.

Perhaps because the three-faced monster had just passed by, frightening off the other monsters, Lumian didn't see a single 'person.' He successfully passed collapsed buildings and gray gravel everywhere and arrived at the base of the blood-colored "peak."

There was still a circle of ruins, but unlike the outer layers, the buildings here hadn't collapsed, but seemed to have completed a warped reassembly as if they had a life of their own. They were interconnected, as if a strange thorny city wall had been built.
The "wall" was dyed a faint grayish black. The windows and doors of the original buildings were embedded messily on its surface. Some were open, permitting one to see the shattered tables and chairs inside. Some were tightly shut, as if they couldn't be pulled open.
Lumian scanned the area and gazed up at the blood-colored mountain behind the city wall.
At this range, even with the heavy fog blanketing the sky and the dim light filtering into this realm, Lumian could see every detail of the mountain peak clearly.
It was made of rocks and soil, no more than 30 meters tall, but it gave off a towering menace. The color on its surface was unnatural, neither the brownish-red of the rocks nor the reddish-brown of the soil. They seemed dyed at a later time, making it look sinister.
According to Aurore's novels and paranormal magazines, this might be dyed red by human blood... Lumian thought. He raised his gaze higher and higher, glancing at the peak shrouded in thick fog.
Suddenly, an unseen wind blew away some of the fog.
The peak came into view.
Sitting cross-legged was a giant four to five meters tall with three heads.
"He" was naked and had three heads growing from "his" neck. One faced left, revealing anger, greed, and hatred. Extremely evil. One faced forward with a warped expression of pain and regret. The other faced right, holy, with pity in its eyes.
The giant had six arms stretching out at odd angles. Its entire body, including the three heads, was made of flesh and organ fragments stitched together with pus flowing everywhere. Especially, transparent blood-like tears dripped from the head facing Lumian.
Seeing the giant, Lumian's mind buzzed as he heard a terrifying voice seeming infinitely far yet right beside him.
His head felt as if it had been split open with an axe, and intense agony occupied his mind, robbing him of all thoughts.
Thick and thin blood vessels protruded from his body surface, so red that they were about to be ignited.
When Lumian "woke up" from his near-death state, he realized that he was curled up on the ground, rolling back and forth, as if

this wasn't enough to resolve the pain in his body.
His vision was blurry, stained with blood, and everything he saw was misty.
In this state, Lumian felt that even the skinless monster could easily kill him. However, perhaps because the black thorn symbol had been completely activated, no "person" dared to enter this area.
As for the giant at the summit of the blood-colored mountain, it was unknown if it couldn't leave or if it had been affected by the black thorn symbol and hadn't attacked Lumian, who had nearly lost control.
After regaining his composure, Lumian stood up and noticed the linen shirt beneath his dark-colored jacket stained with blood and sweat.
What the hell was that? The more he pondered it, the more dread crept in.
With a mere glance, the black thorn symbol had flared to life and nearly overpowered him. It posed an even greater threat than wielding the Dancer's might.
He dared not recall the giant's visage, only deduce what he could from fractured impressions.
An advanced variant of the three-faced monster?
Sheer corruptive influence?
Aurore was right, there are sights not meant to be seen...
It occupies the crimson mountaintop, the heart of this dreamscape in ruins... Does that signify it's integral to the dream's mysteries?
"..."
As his thoughts raced, Lumian forced down the urge to gaze up at the mountain's summit.
If he took another look, it would spell certain death!
He resolved to withdraw for now and return to the real world to recover. He would resume his exploration at night.
Lumian spun on his heel, ready to retrace his steps out of here, when a sudden clanging caught his ear.
What's that? Curiosity seized him, and he devised a plan to sidle over for a peek.
Of course, he would proceed judiciously, not hastily or rashly. He tucked himself into a half-collapsed building facing the city wall to recoup his spirituality.
After a time, Lumian again performed the mysterious sacrificial dance.
He seemed to morph into a high priest of the hidden existence, gratifying that existence with movements that could marshal the ambient forces of nature.
When a burning sensation flared in his chest, Lumian halted and

honed in on the intermittent clanging.
Skirting the blood-hued mountain crest and dilapidated city wall, dancing anew, he spied an orange glimmer through a half-open brownish-red wooden door in the 'wall.'
A flickering orange flame shone behind a half-open wooden door.
Clang! Clang! Clang!
The figure in the room was reflected in a grimy, diagonal glass window above. It looked humanoid, but too spindly in the dim light.
In that moment, the figure raised a hammer-like object and smashed it down with formidable might.
Clang!
Another metallic clash rang out, crisp and ominous.
A blacksmith? There's a blacksmith in these ruins? Lumian guessed, relying on his knowledge.
Trusting that the thorn emblem on his chest hadn't vanished yet, he dropped into a crouch and darted to the glass. He turned and peered in.
Though Lumian's eyes weren't healed, and his vision unclear, he could just make out the scene beyond the city wall.
Shattered furniture and debris littered the space. In the center was a stove, its top half gone, housing a fire. On top, an iron plate cobbled together, mismatched.
A pewter-black dirk lay on the plate, twice as long as a normal dagger, strange patterns coating its surface. Just looking at it made Lumian dizzy.
Clang!
The figure pounded the dirk like a skilled blacksmith, hammer blows ringing out in a steady beat.
'He' wore a black robe, decay marring the side of its face visible to Lumian, even revealing bone in places.
Another monster? Is it picking up where it left off when it was still human? That dirk isn't run-of-the-mill. It's a tad sinister. I wonder if it's a Sealed Artifact or a Beyonder weapon, Lumian thought.
He was less than three meters from the rotting 'blacksmith,' but the other party didn't seem to detect the black thorn symbol on his chest. 'He' kept pounding the dirk in silence.
Given that the black thorn symbol was about to vanish, Lumian recoiled and tiptoed away from the window.
He had only taken a few steps when the searing sensation in his chest disappeared.
The next moment, a creaking sound came from behind him.
Lumian whipped around and saw the mahogany door swing open.
The black-robed 'blacksmith' emerged. There were four or five

putrid gashes on 'his' face that bared its bones. Half of 'his' left eyeball dangled from its eye socket. It looked like a corpse that had been dead for some time.
'He' clutched the hammer in 'his' right hand and the pewter-black dirk in 'his' left. Lumian's reflection glinted in 'his' lifeless eyes.
"F*ck!"
Lumian couldn't help cursing.
He instantly grasped the situation.
The 'blacksmith' monster had clearly been influenced by the black thorn symbol, so 'he' had been 'quietly' pounding the malicious dirk, feigning nonchalance.
When the black thorn symbol disappeared, 'he' immediately seized 'his' weapon and emerged to hunt him.
How cunning!

Chapter 85: Appropriating

As soon as Lumian confirmed the situation, he pivoted on his heel and bolted.

He couldn't leverage the environment here, and he was clueless about the 'blacksmith' monster's abilities. *What choice did he have but to run?*

Once he escaped to the nearest natural trap and it was still in hot pursuit, he'd consider counterattacking.

Thud thud thud!

Lumian didn't run in a straight line but snaked left and right in an S-shape.

He worried it might predict his trajectory and hurl a fireball or long-range weapon.

The old Lumian could run on a curve, but he'd have to throttle back at points. Otherwise, his body couldn't take it and he'd eat dirt.

Things were different now. He was extremely limber, far beyond ordinary humans. His muscles and tendons easily let him arch his body in a smooth semicircle.

With this move, he felt that unless the 'blacksmith' monster had special abilities, he should reach the ruins seven to eight meters away.

Suddenly, dread gripped his heart with premonition.

Without thinking, Lumian plunged forward, riding his momentum.

Sizzling, sharp pain seared his back. The evil pewter-black dirk had sliced him, spurting bright red blood.

The 'blacksmith' monster had caught up in a single bound and swung its weapon.

It seemed to have shortened over a dozen steps to one!

Lumian endured the pain and rolled twice before finally touching a half-collapsed building.

He vaulted in with a whoosh. Slithering through the walls and furnishings as cover, he bolted out the back entrance.

Being back in this area was like a tiger returning to the deep mountains or a trout in a river. He adeptly wove through the ruins and buildings, at times circling around, other times going straight.

Within ten seconds, he arrived at a natural snare he had spotted earlier. He ducked behind the roof that had slid to the ground and held on for the 'blacksmith' monster to turn up.

He didn't try the sacrificial dance because he felt there wasn't enough time. The other side clearly had some distinctive tracking prowess.

As time passed, Lumian didn't spot the 'blacksmith' monster, nor

did he catch any sound approaching. He didn't note any indistinct footprints around him.
It didn't chase after me? Lumian couldn't help but frown.
He was glad, but he also felt this situation was a bit odd.
After some thought, he guessed the 'blacksmith' monster couldn't leave the city wall, so the moment he went into the building ruins, it gave up chasing him.
Considering he had already suffered two injuries and was drained, Lumian decided not to explore further.
Leveraging his terrifying flexibility, he treated the wound on his back and headed toward the edge of the ruins.
After walking a long time, he looked at the familiar collapsed buildings and suddenly felt something was off.
It has already... been more than enough time to finish a meal. The dream ruins... aren't especially large. I should be able... to walk out in a straight line. *Why haven't I… escaped yet?*
The more Lumian contemplated it, the more he sensed that something was amiss. His thoughts were becoming foggy and disjointed, as if severe exhaustion was overtaking him or he was about to drift off to sleep.
He forced himself to focus, relying on his Hunter abilities to locate the path, hoping to get out of these ruins immediately.
However, as he walked, he couldn't help periodically slipping into a daze. Eventually, he didn't even know what he was doing.
After an indeterminate amount of time, Lumian's eyes abruptly reflected the flickering orange glow of a fire.
He found himself back by the "city wall" and the chamber where the 'blacksmith' monster was.
Not good...
I'm... under... its influence...
No wonder... it didn't... chase me...
It seems... I can't force my way... out. I can... only... think of a solution... starting... with that monster...
Lumian's thoughts slowed and fogged.
As he approached the chamber involuntarily, he struggled to perform the mysterious sacrificial dance.
Since he had to confront the 'blacksmith' monster, his greatest reliance was the black thorn symbol on his chest. He had to activate it immediately!
Amid the sonorous but intermittent noises from within, Lumian saw the door emitting orange flames open. The monster in a black robe holding a pewter-black dirk and hammer appeared in the doorway.
Unlike before, much of the rotting marks on its face had vanished,

and fresh flesh had grown over the wounds that exposed its bones.
Its eyes lit up as it gazed at Lumian with undisguised greed and amusement.
This made it appear more human than zombie.
At the same time, Lumian saw himself reflected in the glass window.
His face was pale, and his eyes were dull. Some of his skin showed signs of decay.
He looked more like a zombie than a human.
Lumian instantly realized the truth.
I will... take its place... It will... walk out... as a human...
Lumian, who didn't know what ability had affected him or when he had encountered the anomaly, only had one thought—giving it his all by finishing the sacrificial dance and partially activating the black thorn symbol on his chest.
He slowly but firmly began his dance, but the 'blacksmith' monster didn't seize the opportunity to attack. It seemed to be patiently waiting for the outcome, afraid that additional actions would impact its fate.
As he edged closer and danced each step, Lumian's vision grew increasingly blurry. He only knew that the 'blacksmith' monster's smile was becoming more and more human.
After advancing some distance, Lumian's mind buzzed.
He heard a terrifying sound that seemed to come from an infinite distance yet also seemed close at hand.
This wasn't clear enough and was very illusory. It only caused some disorder in his mind, preventing him from experiencing a near-death experience.
Amid his grogginess, Lumian's thoughts cleared, and his vision returned to normal.
He felt a burning sensation in his chest and knew that the partially activated black thorn symbol meant trouble.
Almost simultaneously, he saw the smile on the 'blacksmith' monster's face freeze.
Numerous silver and black warts protruded from the monster's face, head, and hands.
The wicked dirk in its hand buzzed and vibrated violently, as if trembling in fear.
Pa!
Amidst a crisp metallic snap, a jagged fracture shot across the pewter-black dirk's demon-etched blade.
The 'blacksmith' monster crumbled into silver-black warts and warped maggots crawling across its black robe.
The maggots and warts stopped moving, turning into lifeless gray

flesh.
Lumian gawked at the scene, dumbstruck. It was as if the enemy had suddenly committed suicide mid-battle while he stood by helpless.
After over ten seconds, he snorted at the fleshy lumps in bemused disbelief.
"So you dragged me here to attend your own funeral?
"You should've said so earlier. No need for all this pomp and show. I'd have gladly shown up and applauded your swan song!"
He strode over to the chunks of flesh the 'blacksmith' monster had crumbled into and scrutinized them intently.
Nothing else seemed amiss. Save that the slightly cracked pewter-black dirk still quivered minutely, like a wounded animal encountering its mortal foe.
Lumian's heart raced as he looked down at his chest, sensing the black thorn symbol beneath his clothes.
He realized the truth and grabbed the pewter-black dirk with his right hand.
The evil dirk trembled vigorously but didn't struggle or resist. It was docile.
As soon as he held it, the heat in his chest intensified.
Something leaked out, resonating with the pewter-black dirk.
Amidst the metallic hum, Lumian grasped a greater understanding of the sinister dirk in his grip.
It was a corrupted Beyonder weapon, gaining power and a semblance of life.
In other words, Lumian hadn't encountered a 'blacksmith' monster —the dirk was the true menace. The 'blacksmith' monster was its puppet, or rather, wielder.
It could gradually transform any living being who touched its cold steel and drew blood into a zombie, robbing them of will and reason. They would always clutch it and act on its desires.
Those who were cut by it, spilling crimson, would have their destiny appropriated by its edge.
When seizing one's fate, it could inflict no further harm.
Just now, it had bartered the fate of the 'blacksmith' monster becoming a puppet to exchange for Lumian leaving the wilderness as a human.
If there was nothing to trade, he had to kill the target completely to strip a portion of his fate from him and store it in the dirk.
This ability came from the Dancer's corresponding Sequence 5, Fate Appropriator!
Therefore, after the corruption in Lumian's body was half-activated, it resonated with the evil dirk through flesh and blood,

letting some knowledge seep out.
Otherwise, he could only get someone to use divination and figure out patterns to grasp the pewter-black dirk's abilities and characteristics. He could also rely on his repeated experiments to gather information.
After sorting out the additional knowledge in his mind, Lumian looked at the evil dirk that was still trembling in his hand and chuckled.
"Actually, I don't mind you appropriating some of my destiny, but you'll have to bear the consequences!
"If you can swap with my fate of being trapped in this time loop, I'll kneel and grovel before you three times.
"Tsk, but randomly appropriating destinies will only hurt you!"
The pewter-black dirk merely trembled, not daring to respond.
Lumian now understood why the dirk was so obedient.
First, the half-activated black thorn symbol suppressed it. Second, encountering Lumian had traumatized the sentient weapon.
Exhaling, Lumian said, "From today onward, your name is Fate Appropriator Dirk. Got it?"
The dirk bobbed up and down twice, as if nodding.
"Unfortunately, you're only a Beyonder weapon. Your power will gradually fade. You could have lasted two years, but now, severely damaged from your foolishness, you'll only survive half a year," Lumian said regretfully.
In fact, he could replenish Fate Appropriator by extracting power from the corruption in his body, but that required finding someone to repair the crack.
No sooner had he spoken than the heat in his chest quickly vanished. The minute was up.
Wasting no time, he hurled Fate Appropriator Dirk away as if it were red-hot coal.

Chapter 86: Another Idea

The pewter-black dirk clattered to the ground, bouncing a few times before coming to rest.

Lumian heaved a sigh of relief and muttered to himself, Without the protection of the half-activated black thorn symbol, this thing's a ticking time bomb...

Luckily, he already knew how to avoid the sinister dirk's adverse effects.

Lumian approached the grayish-white remains and picked up the black robe left behind by the monstrous 'blacksmith.'

He tore off several strips of cloth and wrapped them tightly around his right hand, as if applying a thorough bandage.

Then, Lumian grasped the Fate Appropriator Dirk.

The pewter-black dirk remained unresponsive the entire time.

Prepared to discard the item in his hand at any moment, Lumian relaxed and whispered, "I need to find a scabbard to carry it around safely.

"Do I have to permanently bandage my left or right hand just to have time to protect myself when I need to draw the blade in an emergency?

"This thing is dangerous, but it's also incredibly powerful. Besides its short lifespan, it outclasses all the Beyonder weapons Aurore mentioned. Many Level 3 Sealed Artifacts might not even compare."

While muttering to himself, Lumian swaddled the Fate Appropriator Dirk in layers of black cloth.

Once wrapped securely in three layers, he slid the evil dirk into his left belt with a sense of relief.

Having done this, Lumian rubbed his temples and, despite his physical and mental exhaustion, entered the room from which the 'blacksmith' monster had emerged. He searched the room meticulously.

Aside from the smoldering furnace, he found nothing.

Lumian's investigation concluded cautiously and carefully as he retraced his steps.

Unhindered by fate, he successfully left the ruins, crossed the desolate wasteland, and entered his semi-subterranean two-story building.

Not in a rush to sleep, Lumian left the room, stowed the Fate Appropriator Dirk, and rested briefly. Once his spirituality recovered and his needs were met, he performed the bizarre dance —alternating between madness and distortion—in his bedroom.

He aimed to attract the peculiar creatures in the vicinity and let

one of them possess him to test the negative effects.
Having sensed the fear and reverence of the flaming monster, the three-faced monster, and the Fate Appropriator Dirk towards the black thorn symbol, he was no longer as terrified of allowing certain entities to possess him.
His corruption was far more powerful!
Moreover, he was quite exhausted and would soon fall asleep. When the time came, even if the strange being he harbored was reluctant to leave or caused severe negative effects, he would recover after resting in the real world for a day.
Is this what Aurore often calls cheating and exploiting loopholes? Lumian mused as he danced.
As the dance intensified, his spirituality expanded, merging with a certain force of nature that radiated in all directions.
Gradually, Lumian, seemingly fused with his surroundings, sensed something entering the area.
He lifted his leg, took a step, and spun around. Without activating his Spirit Vision, he saw three translucent figures materialize at the bedroom's glass window.
They were the familiar skinless monster, shotgun monster, and mouth-orifice monster.
Seems like my spiritual perception isn't strong enough, or my level is too low. I can only 'summon' them... Lumian didn't mind. He drew the ritual silver dagger Aurore had given him and sliced a wound on the back of his left hand.
A drop of crimson blood quickly welled up but didn't spread.
On the spot, it congealed and took on a demonic hue.
The three ghostly figures outside the window instantly stirred.
Lumian deftly used the ritual silver dagger to pick up the congealed drop of blood. With a final flourish of his dance moves, he pointed the blade towards the mouth-orifice monster.
He was inviting the entity to latch onto him.
The monster, bearing three black marks on its upper body, opened its vortex-shaped mouth as if responding to Lumian's call, but it hesitated to take further action.
That's right. The window is still closed, and the monsters in the dream ruins don't dare enter my house... Lumian swiftly grasped the situation. In sync with his dance rhythm, he leapt, landing gracefully on the desk before the window.
With his left hand, he slid the tightly shut glass window open. Then, he extended the ritual silver dagger, bloodied tip first, outside the house.
Instead of devouring the drop of blood and entering Lumian's body through the ritual silver dagger, the maw-like creature retreated

seven or eight meters, floating amidst the howling wind, still mesmerized by the dance.
"Hey, come over!" Lumian, on the verge of completing his final dance step, couldn't help but urge anxiously.
The three hazy, translucent figures outside the house drifted further away. As Lumian's dance came to a halt, they vanished entirely.
"..." Lumian stared at the scene, baffled by the mouth-orifice monster's refusal to possess him.
He carefully reviewed the dance and the bloodletting process, certain he had made no mistakes.
Could it be that its fixation remembers that I killed it, so it's unwilling to attach itself to me?
But the knowledge that came with Dancer didn't mention this. Logically, it should be more eager to possess me and take revenge... Lumian pondered.
Recalling the three-faced monster's flight upon seeing him, he formulated a new hypothesis.
I'm corrupted by an evil god and sealed by a greater being. Are these strange creatures terrified and unwilling to attach themselves to me?
This was an extremely rare circumstance. It made sense that Dancer's corresponding mystical knowledge wouldn't cover such anomalies.
The more Lumian considered it, the more he believed this was the cause, and the angrier he became.
"So you guys just watch me dance, but aren't willing to possess me?
"What's this called? In Aurore's words, freeloading!"
Lumian's disappointment grew as he realized that, before reaching Contractee, one of Dancer's abilities was rendered useless. He couldn't attract strange creatures and exploit their traits or powers.
He consoled himself, hoping that only the dream ruins' creatures behaved like this. After all, they were closely tied to the owner of the black thorn symbol.
I wonder what I can attract in reality. Will they dare to attach themselves to me... Lumian mused, walking to his bed and lying down.
His mood lifted as he glanced at the Fate Appropriator Dirk, ensconced in layers of black cloth, on the cabinet beside him.
This powerful Beyonder weapon would aid him in delving deeper into the dream ruins and uncovering their secrets. The only drawback was its inability to be brought into the real world.

I wonder if that mysterious lady can help bring it out, just like how she brought the potion and ritual ingredients into the dream ruins...
But the next time I explore the dream ruins, I'll have to trouble her to bring the Fate Appropriator Dirk back in...
She's definitely unwilling to keep providing help. She's clearly averse to hassle and prefers slacking off...
With these thoughts, Lumian drifted into a deep sleep.
.....
When Lumian woke up, the sky was an unnatural shade of inky black. Only a smoldering crimson smear of sunset remained in the distance, filling him with a bleak melancholy as if the entire world had abandoned him.
Adjusting his emotions, Lumian left the room and descended to the first floor.
Aurore was busy cooking dinner.
"Are your eyes okay?" Lumian went over to help.
"Pretty much." Aurore tucked a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear and widened her eyes at him.
Lumian peered into their light blue depths but saw nothing amiss beyond a hint of blood.
Aurore continued frying the lamb chops and casually asked, "Discovered anything interesting in the dream ruins this time?"
Lumian began chopping ingredients for the last dish, recounting his encounters.
"That blade is powerful indeed." Seeing her brother was unharmed, Aurore stifled her concern with a laugh. "If it were me, I'd never call it Fate Appropriator Dirk. Too straightforward, lacking charm."
Lumian asked curiously, "What would you name it then?"
Aurore smiled and said, "Fallen Mercury!"
"Fallen Mercury it is!" Lumian nodded immediately.
He had to use the name his sister gave!
Aurore burst out laughing.
"Actually, it's not the best name, but that's all I could think of on short notice.
"Hmm, the monsters' behavior confirms our theory. The black thorn symbol on your chest, or rather, the corruption in your body isn't simple. It can suppress something powerful to an extent and relates closely to that hidden existence.
"Perhaps the key to the loop lies with you."
"Yes." Lumian nodded. "Let's see what secrets the dream ruins hold. Then we'll wait patiently for the twelfth night."
So far, they had investigated almost all abnormalities. Only the tomb where the owl was had not been explored.

It was far too dangerous. Aurore didn't believe she, Lumian and the three foreigners could face it. Her only hope was asking Madame Pualis for help, but she clearly didn't intend to interfere, merely waiting for the opportune moment.
Lumian didn't hold much hope recounting how the strange creatures his dance attracted were hindered by the two symbols on his body, preventing success.
"Grande Soeur, any ideas to circumvent this restriction?"
Aurore scooped up the lamb chops, pondering a moment.
"Since it's impossible to invite a 'god' to possess you, why not try giving an order?"
"Order?" Lumian's eyes lit up.
Aurore nodded slightly.
"Since those strange creatures fear the corruption in your body and the seal of that great existence, use their fear like a fox assuming the authority of a tiger. Order them to attach themselves to you. Right, use ancient Hermes when you try."
"That's an idea..." Lumian understood what his sister meant by "a fox assuming the authority of a tiger."

Chapter 87: Catharsis

Aurore carried the plate of lamb chops to the table and said, "I'm not sure if ordering them under those circumstances will work. After all, I'm not a Dancer, and I don't have any relevant mysticism knowledge. However, you won't lose anything by trying."

"That's true." Lumian took over at the stove and said with a grin, "It'll just be another wound while I bleed a little. I'll recover after a nap. What do you think the three-headed giant at the top of the mountain is? What does it have to do with the hidden existence and the corruption in my body?"

Aurore set the plates down and turned around.

"Don't you think you're overestimating me? I've never encountered or heard of such strange things."

Without waiting for Lumian's response, she added thoughtfully, "However, there are many similar concepts in the myths and legends of my hometown. They have three heads and six arms, gods or demons..."

She continued, "And according to our guesses, the dream ruins are closely related to the corruption in your body. There's a high chance that the giant's image reflects some aspects of the hidden existence.

"You said that the honorific name or description of that person is different from the usual ones. Every segment contains three aspects and three forms that symbolize a certain authority. Therefore, it's very normal to correspond to three heads, just like how the three-faced monster has faces that represent the three stages of humanity.

"As for why it has six arms and why it sits atop the blood-colored mountain, there's too little information. I can't guess.

"Hmm... Focus on the circle of 'walls' for the time being. I feel that we can find many useful clues."

"Alright." Lumian followed his sister's instructions and placed the sliced shredded potatoes into the pot, stir-frying them with oil.

Aurore ended the topic regarding the dream ruins and said to Lumian, "When you went to bed in the afternoon, I thought about it seriously and decided to invite the three foreigners to stay with us."

"Why?" Lumian was puzzled.

Aurore watched her brother bustling around and sighed.

"We assumed the padre would react like a normal person, but we can't forget that some of his followers have already accepted a boon. In a way, they're corrupted.

"According to the mysterious lady, the boon's effects concentrate

on the body and mind. So, besides gaining abilities, one's personality will shift. The more boons a person takes, the more severe the change will be, especially if they can't handle it."
"Right." Lumian recalled the mysterious lady's words.
She warned that if the body couldn't endure such a massive "boon," the recipient would either turn into a monster, become a puppet of an unknown entity, or transform into someone else who'd treat things they cherished in the past with indifference.
Aurore concluded, "Thus, Shepherd Pierre Berry and his followers, who've received the boons long ago, might disregard the padre's plan and seek greater vengeance.
"If the five of us stick together and support each other, we can effectively improve our chances of survival until the twelfth night."
Lumian pondered her proposal and agreed.
But he raised a logistical issue.
"So, where do they stay? In the living room downstairs?"
"It won't work as well if we're on separate floors." Aurore glanced at her brother, who approached with a plate of stir-fried shredded potatoes. "You can move into my room, and we'll let the three foreigners use your bedroom and the study upstairs. They can divide the rooms among themselves."
"Huh?" Lumian didn't expect such an arrangement. "I'll share a bed with you?"
Aurore couldn't help but laugh.
"No big deal. Strong, independent women don't sweat the small stuff!"
"Huh?" Lumian didn't grasp his sister's last remark.
Aurore chuckled, explaining, "I'm saying that given our situation, let's not get hung up on trivial matters.
"Do you want to share a bed with Ryan and Valentine, or should I sleep with Leah?"
"True, I can't fully trust them." Lumian nodded.
The three official investigators only cooperated with the siblings because they were trapped in a loop. Who knew if they'd secretly manipulate the situation while they slept together, planning to capture the two wild Beyonders once the loop ended?
Aurore chuckled and suggested, "If they're concerned about us and decide to share a room, you can sleep in the other one."
"Better to stay in the same room." Lumian felt the walls offered little protection.
Aurore said no more, only adding, "Remind me to restock our food supply tomorrow. After Lent, the villagers will grow stranger. We might need to defend this place or hide in the nearest high mountain pasture."

Then, she urged her brother to eat dinner.
Before sunset, Lumian left the semi-subterranean two-story building, ready to invite Ryan and the others to move into his home.
Upon seeing Ol' Tavern in sight, Lumian spotted a few familiar faces.
Pons Bénet was strolling down the village's main road with his three thugs.
Almost instantly, the black-haired, blue-eyed, musclebound villain noticed Lumian.
He couldn't help but clamp his legs together, as if recalling some excruciating agony.
Eyeing Lumian, Pons Bénet faced a dilemma.
He craved revenge, but feared history would repeat itself with him and his men beaten to a pulp.
As Pons Bénet wavered, Lumian flashed a brilliant grin.
"Hey, isn't this my rebellious son?"
He strode towards the villain and his three thugs who had drowned Reimund, poised to pummel them.
Pons Bénet saw this and didn't hesitate. With his eyes, he signaled to the three brutes beside him, ordering them to charge.
The three thugs immediately rushed at Lumian and pulled out short sticks, iron rods, and other weapons.
Lumian sped up too.
Just as he was about to collide with the three thugs, he abruptly leapt at one of the enemies.
This unorthodox move caused the three thugs' attacks to miss.
Lumian grabbed the target's shoulder and did a somersault.
His back seemed to flex like a spring, helping him grab the enemy and build up enough force for the roll.
In an agile, exaggerated forward somersault, Lumian hurled the enemy and smashed him into the ground.
Bang! The thug's vision darkened. His whole body ached, and he couldn't rise for a moment.
At that instant, Lumian landed behind the other two, only seven or eight steps from Pons Bénet.
He crouched slightly and charged at the villain. As Pons Bénet frantically dodged, he shouted, "Quick, quick! Stop him!"
The remaining two thugs hastily turned and chased after Lumian.
Pons Bénet composed himself and brazenly charged at the bastard, preparing to stall him before they surrounded him.
Just as the two thugs were about to catch up to Lumian, who had deliberately not run at full speed, suddenly stopped and squatted.
Amid grinding sounds, not only did the two thugs fail to hit their

target's back, but because they couldn't halt in time, they lost their balance and collided with Pons Bénet.
Lumian pounced like a tiger and grabbed the two thugs' necks. He lifted their bodies and smashed their heads together.
Bang!
The two thugs' foreheads instantly swelled and they fainted on the spot.
Immediately after, Lumian tossed away the burden and exerted strength with his feet. He twisted his body and slid behind Pons, who had just risen.
He grabbed the other party's arms and bent them backward.
With a cracking sound, Pons Bénet let out an extremely pained scream.
"How is it? Does it feel good?" Lumian asked Pons Bénet with a smile as he hoisted him and marched out of the village.
Before long, he arrived beside the river, grabbed the back of Pons Bénet's head, and forced him underwater.
As bubbles surfaced, Lumian lifted Pons Bénet's head, turned his face, and asked with a smile, "Does it feel good to bully others?"
Pons Bénet's face was soaked, and he looked to be in extreme agony. Snot and saliva flowed out, making it impossible for him to answer.
"Doesn't it feel great?" Lumian's voice suddenly intensified. He grabbed the villain's head and smashed his forehead into the water, hitting the cobblestones.
Bright crimson liquid seeped out of the water. Pons Bénet struggled uselessly with his legs, unable to lift his head.
Gulp. Gulp. As time dragged on, his struggles weakened.
Only then did Lumian haul him up. He thrust out his left hand and smacked Pons across the face.
"I'm asking you, does it feel good to bully others?"
Pure terror filled Pons's eyes. He didn't know how to respond.
Just then, a figure ambled over to the riverside. It was the hooded Shepherd Pierre Berry.
He glanced at the pathetic Pons and gently told Lumian, "We're all from the same village. Enough. You want to kill him?"
Lumian immediately released Pons's head and stood up. He grinned at Pierre Berry, replying,
"I'll listen to you. Make sure this jerk doesn't bully others again."
Without waiting for Pierre's response, Lumian strode past the shepherd into the village.
.....
On the second floor of Ol' Tavern, in Ryan's room, Lumian relayed his sister's thoughts to the three official investigators.

Ryan exchanged a look with Leah and Valentine and nodded.
"Smart thinking. In a situation like this, spreading ourselves too thin just makes us an easy target. We can move into your house now."
As they headed to Lumian and Aurore's house with her luggage, Leah asked Lumian amidst her tinkling sounds, "So what's the plan for the tomb?"
"The plan?" Lumian snorted. "You think we can just waltz in there?"
Leah smiled, relieved. "Good, you're still being cautious."
Ryan chimed in, "What we mean is if whatever's in that tomb really leads to the cycle's key, it'll show up during the twelfth night ritual. And if it's got nothing to do with the source of the cycle, why take the risk going in?"
"In short," Lumian said, catching on, "we just wait patiently for the twelfth night?"

Chapter 88

Ryan nodded at Lumian's confirmation.

"You can interpret it that way, but if there are any other abnormalities worth investigating, we can't ignore them."

"Alright." Lumian actually shared the same thought.

He hadn't even planned on participating in Lent, just in case he couldn't resist attacking when he saw the "performance" at the celebration.

The four of them rapidly reached Lumian's residence, where Aurore led them to the second floor.

Now dressed in a pure white cotton dress that accentuated her down-to-earth charm, Aurore pointed to Lumian's bedroom and study, offering the three official investigators a choice.

"You can choose either room."

Ryan glanced at Leah, seeking her opinion.

After pondering for a few seconds, Leah raised her right hand, pointed at the study with a smile, and said, "That recliner looks pretty good; I could sleep there. Ryan, bunk in that room with Valentine."

While Aurore had the same question in mind, Lumian asked, "You trust us that much?"

He assumed the three foreigners would opt to sleep in the same room on the floor, fearing an attack if they were separated.

Leah grinned and answered Lumian's half-mocking, half-doubtful query, "My divination tells me the two of you can be trusted."

As she spoke, she walked into the study. Accompanied by tinkling sounds, she lay on the recliner with a contented expression.

Aurore found Leah intriguing and approachable. She smiled and advised, "A friend once told me that you can believe in divination, but not blindly. Divination is not all-powerful."

"My mentor said something similar, but we're all in the same situation. If I don't trust it, what else can we do?" Leah replied with a grin, snuggling into the recliner.

Aurore didn't mind relinquishing her favorite seat. She pulled over a chair and sat down.

Their study also served as a small living room. It occasionally hosted afternoon tea parties, so there was ample space and chairs.

Ryan surveyed the corridor briefly before returning to the study. He said to Aurore and Lumian, "I have some suggestions."

"Please, go ahead." Aurore politely assumed an attentive posture.

Ryan nodded and offered, "First, when you sleep at night, don't close any doors. Let everyone be in the same space. This way, no matter where an abnormality occurs, we can react promptly.

"Second, considering we've destroyed the altar, someone might attempt to deal with us before Lent. Starting tonight, everyone will take turns on night duty. Yes, from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. the next morning, two hours per person..."
How professional... Aurore muttered almost silently.
Lumian glanced at her, as if asking why she hadn't thought of it.
Aurore spread her hands slightly, signaling her lack of experience in team operations.
She then turned to Ryan and Valentine, stating confidently, "Lumian will cover the period between 10 p.m. and midnight."
Leah and the others didn't object to this arrangement.
From their perspective, it made sense. Among the five present, Lumian had the lowest Sequence and least experience. He was most prone to mistakes on night duty, but from 10 p.m. to midnight, others would still be awake to cover for him.
Lumian knew his sister's intentions extended beyond this.
He had to explore the dream ruins undisturbed after falling asleep.
After finalizing the first schedule, Valentine volunteered, "I'm used to sleeping and waking early. I'll take the 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. slot."
"You get up early to welcome the sunrise?" Lumian teased instinctively.
Valentine's gaze on him softened.
"Yes, I want to greet the rising sun and praise the light."
His eyes seemed to say: "As expected, only a devout believer of the Eternal Blazing Sun understands me."
Hey, I'm mocking you, brother! Lumian felt slightly defeated by Valentine.
In the Eternal Blazing Sun Church, "brother" was a term used among believers. The two mainstream organizations within it, the Order of Preachers and the Brotherhood Minor, employed the term.
"I'm not used to being woken up mid-sleep," Leah chimed in. "I'll take the midnight to 2 a.m. slot."
Aurore nodded.
"I like to wake up late. I can take 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. And don't wake me for breakfast tomorrow. I'll get up around noon."
"Leave the rest to me." Ryan claimed the worst period with satisfaction.
He also entered the study and found a chair to sit on.
A conversation flowed effortlessly. Aurore, though seldom venturing out, possessed a wealth of knowledge spanning from astronomy to geography. She had her finger on the pulse of the latest trends, scandals, and supernatural events in metropolises like Trier and Backlund. This left Leah, Ryan, and the others secretly in awe of her.

"As expected of the renowned author, Aurore Lee," Leah couldn't help but exclaim. "No wonder you can tackle any theme."
Aurore inquired with genuine curiosity, "Have you read my novels?"
Leah's eyes sparkled as she replied with a smile, "I've been reading your first novel since I was a young girl. By the way, I'd love your autograph!"
As she searched for papers and fountain pens, the silver bells on her veil and boots jingled.
"Are those Sealed Artifacts?" Having heard Lumian mention Leah's performance with the four bells, Aurore couldn't resist asking.
Leah produced a stack of post-it notes and a fountain pen, casually responding, "Yes, they can proactively warn me and enhance my divination abilities. The downside is they're rather noisy and not exactly discreet. Plus, the wearer must dress fashionably, with a dress being mandatory. It has to look good, or it'll be not only useless but also potentially misleading or even dangerous."
Aurore chuckled. "I can't decide if these bells were originally a man or a woman."
Lumian agreed. If they were from a woman, it was a remnant of her vanity. If a man, he was undoubtedly a pervert.
Leah offered a faint smile.
"That involves some confidentiality, so I can't say any more."
She stood up, handing Aurore a post-it note and the fountain pen.
Aurore signed and asked, "Which genre of my novels do you prefer?"
"Romance," Leah replied without hesitation. "Your first novel, Eternal Love, left a deep impression on me."
"I wrote that book too early," Aurore admitted with a hint of embarrassment. "I was young, and my writing skills were unpolished. I lacked experience. Many scenes felt rigid, and much of the dialogue was overly emotional and unrealistic..."
Lumian chimed in, "But it's sincere and original."
Having read his sister's novel, he knew it dealt with a couple's separation through life and death, interwoven with adventure, misunderstandings, and terminal illness. It was a trailblazing piece in the Intis literary world.
Naturally, this drew criticism from conservative authors and critics. They echoed Aurore's self-assessment and claimed it couldn't qualify as literature, deeming it a mere pedestrian novel.
"That's right," Leah agreed, retrieving the paper and pen. She looked at Aurore and asked with a smile, "Ms. Author, would you consider becoming our informant at Bureau 8?"
Seeing Aurore's surprise, she continued, "Our primary objective in

targeting wild Beyonders is that they're unpredictable and may lose control or cause disaster at any moment. Otherwise, they can use their Beyonder powers for all sorts of malicious purposes to satisfy their desires.
"Over the past few days in the village, I've carefully observed both of you and confirmed that you're orderly Beyonders. Prior to arriving in Cordu, the information we gathered indicated that you haven't committed any wrongdoing on the surface.
"This meets our recruitment standards. Moreover, once you become our informants, you won't need to worry about being targeted by official Beyonders."
Aurore found the proposition enticing. She glanced at Lumian and gave a slight nod.
"I'll think about it. I'll give you my answer when the cycle is over."
Lumian immediately understood why his sister had looked his way.
I don't have a problem, but will a heavily corrupted guy like you bomb the test?
After chatting briefly, the siblings bid adieu to Leah and the others and headed back to Aurore's room.
Aurore perched on the edge of the bed and glanced at the door. She hushed her voice and muttered, "Leah's socially adept."
"What do you mean?" Lumian also sensed Leah had made the vibe harmonious in the study.
Aurore smiled and said, "She took the initiative to bring up my novel and asked for my autograph to bond with me, so she could pitch recruiting me. The recruiting was to fix the distrust and barriers we have, easing teamwork the next few days.
"The whole process seemed natural, not off-putting or wary. That's a sign of high EQ. You should follow her lead!"
Lumian remembered the chat and said self-deprecatingly, "If it were me, I might've been booted by now."
Amused, Aurore leaned back and said, "At least you know yourself!"
She ruffled her blonde hair and said, "I'll nap a bit. My eyes haven't fully healed so I need more rest. Rouse me at ten and I'll keep watch over you. It's your first night shift, so better safe than sorry."
Lumian didn't object and agreed instantly. He watched his sister lie on the bed unhesitatingly, pull the blanket over her and close her eyes.
The room instantly turned eerily silent.
Lumian quietly switched off the electric lamp and drew the curtains.
Then, he sat on the chair by the desk and quietly watched his sister sleeping peacefully under the crimson moonlight. His heart

gradually calmed down.

Chapter 89: Nothing Happened

The wind outside rustled, almost silent. Lumian allowed his thoughts to wander in this tranquil state as instinctive questions ran through his mind.

There's still light in the corridor. Leah must be awake still, reading Aurore's book collection...

Pitch darkness blankets my bedroom. Valentine should be resting in bed. I wonder what Ryan's up to...

Heh heh, they didn't bring any alcohol on their first visit. They've no clue about Darième's customs...

If the cycle lifts, Grande Soeur can turn informant for Bureau 8. When the time comes, she won't fret over any investigation if she goes to Trier... As for me, I needn't undergo any special tests as an informant, right?

Now we've a full theory of the whole affair. The sole thing we can't be sure of is the owl and the dead warlock in the tomb's role...

If they bewitched the padre and company, causing the abnormality to achieve some goal with the twelfth night ritual, why did they do nothing but monitor my progress exploring the dream ruins?

Could it be that, like Madame Pualis, they await a specific time or the ritual on the twelfth night, intending to complete the disrupted part? Is that why they want no changes to the loop restarting it ahead of time?

Their actions in turn prove the key to the loop lies with me. That's why they repeatedly try to confirm how far I've explored the dream ruins...

If I unlock the dream's secret before the twelfth night comes and master recycling the corruption, will they ignore the possibility of the cycle restarting ahead of time and attack me to hold me in custody?

Yes, it's very likely they still have their memories...

As all sorts of thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian suddenly heard faint commotion.

"Baa..."

It was a sheep's bleat, as if from afar.

Lumian instantly thought of the three people turned sheep and Shepherd Pierre Berry.

Don't tell me he really wants to attack us dead of night? Lumian stood up and listened intently.

Outside the window was but the wind's sound through leaves and branches. No bleating.

It seemed Lumian so engrossed in his thoughts was hallucinating.

But he didn't think so because he felt slight heat in his left chest.
The black thorn symbol seemed to have appeared again!
This meant an invisible force closely tied to the hidden existence had quietly invaded the room.
Lumian had no time to think. He rushed to the bed and shook Aurore.
"Wake up! Wake up!" he shouted in a hushed voice.
He instinctively worried Leah, Ryan and Valentine would sense something amiss with him.
Aurore opened her eyes, her light-blue eyes clearly dazed.
"What time is it?" she asked in a weak voice. Obviously she was still not fully awake.
"There's a situation," Lumian said decisively before continuing, "Half past nine."
They were one of the few families in the village with wall clocks.
Aurore's eyes snapped open. She bolted upright, threw out her right hand, and massaged her temples.
She had no time to consider what she might see that she shouldn't.
If she couldn't pinpoint the anomaly and confirm the problem as soon as possible, she might not have to worry about seeing anything again. The dead had no need for eyes!
Aurore scanned the room, her gaze darkening as if reflecting strange, indescribable lights and shadows.
Lumian seized the chance to tell his sister about the sheep's bleat he'd heard in the distance and the triggered heat in the black thorn symbol on his chest.
Aurore frowned. "But I didn't detect anything..."
"The burning in my chest remains," Lumian rumbled.
He felt inexplicably terrified. The darkness around him was not simple. An indescribable danger lurked.
Aurore scrutinized every corner of the room, trying to find the unknown.
Silently, Lumian broke into a cold sweat—a stark contrast to the searing heat in his left chest.
He deliberated for a moment and said, "*Why not tell Ryan and the others?* Maybe they can find something."
Aurore pondered, then nodded.
"Use your sudden sense of impending danger as an excuse."
"Right." Lumian opened his mouth, about to yell outside—then froze.
"What is it?" Aurore asked, alarmed.
Lumian frowned. "The heat in my chest is dimming fast..."
Meaning the black thorn symbol was "fading" rapidly.

"The danger invading our room has left?" Aurore mused. "Because we prepared, it did nothing?"
"Perhaps." Lumian turned to the corridor and bellowed, "Something's wrong!"
Ryan appeared in the doorway in the blink of an eye, followed by Leah, then Valentine, who looked jolted from sleep.
Without waiting to be asked, Lumian recounted what had happened, using his sense of danger in place of the burning in his chest.
Ryan listened intently, not doubting this was Lumian's hallucination. He sighed,
"It's useful indeed to take turns on night watch.
"Mostly it's boredom, but if it saves everyone, it's almost life and death."
As he spoke, he conjured pure Sunrise Gleam around him, circling every room on the second floor.
Though he couldn't find the sinister power, he could at least sanctify the environment.
Leah paced around, muttering under her breath. Her veil and boots jangled ominously, then fell silent just as abruptly.
Finally, she said to Aurore and Lumian, "It was dicey just now. On top of that, whatever it was could block my Sealed Artifact from giving me any warning. I'm afraid these stupid bells will only go off once that thing really starts targeting someone. But now, it has left."
"Well, that's reassuring." Aurore sighed in relief.
"Maybe it wasn't a single creature." Lumian relaxed and grinned. "Could've been more than one."
Ryan and the others were silent.
"That's even worse!" Aurore lashed out at Lumian and told the investigators, "Now that the alarm's off, let's get back to our schedule."
She didn't mention who might've snuck in to attack them. There were too many possibilities: Shepherd Pierre Berry, the unknown corpse in the tomb, or the shady deputy padre.
Without solid clues, speculating would just waste time. Better to wait until daylight.
For now, they just had to remember that nighttime held real danger. Someone was out to get them, so they'd need to stay on high alert.
Once Leah and the others had gone to their rooms, Lumian glanced at the wall clock and asked Aurore, "Want to sleep in a bit more?"
"No way, waking up and crashing this late sucks." Aurore stretched her arms overhead. "Ugh, just to handle emergencies, I got this

dress with pockets for spell components and useful stuff. I didn't even dare roll over, scared I might stab myself. I slept like a board."
As she spoke, she hopped off the bed and strode to the window. She yanked back the curtains and peered outside.
Cordu was silent. Many houses were still lit up.
"I thought that owl would come after us for sure, but there's no sign of it out there." Aurore surveyed the area and explained to Lumian.
Lumian nodded.
"That was my guess too."
He then leaned in and whispered everything he had figured out to his sister.
"Not bad," Aurore said with a smile. "You're getting better at analyzing situations. I've got nothing to add." She paused. "But we can't take matters into our own hands. That tomb is too dangerous..."
At this point, she exclaimed, "At dawn, we'll pay Madame Pualis a visit and tell her your theory. Let her know the Warlock's and owl's motives might affect her escape from this time loop at that precise moment."
"I'll go myself," Lumian said. He didn't want Aurore anywhere near Madame Pualis who had designs on her.
Aurore didn't argue. She only reminded him, "Watch your back. Don't piss her off, or else..."
She eyed his abdomen meaningfully.
Aurore sighed and said, "Truth is, that mysterious lady at Ol' Tavern is clearly stronger, but she wants nothing to do with this time loop. No way she'll help us investigate that tomb."
"Yeah," Lumian agreed.
He then said, "Still, I'll drop by Ol' Tavern tomorrow to see if I can run into her. What if she changes her mind?"
"Fair enough." Aurore didn't object.
They chatted in hushed tones until midnight.
After Lumian relieving his post with Leah in the study, he returned to Aurore's room. He lay beside his sister, inhaling her familiar scent and sinking into the soft mattress. Sleep eluded him.
"What's wrong?" Aurore asked, noticing his tenseness.
"Just not used to this," Lumian said carefully.
Aurore scoffed.
"What happened to the bold Lumian I know?"
Lumian didn't reply. Aurore exhaled slowly and smiled.
"Remember when you first started tailing me? You were scared I'd slip away and refused to sleep at night. You were super vigilant."
"Yeah, I do." Lumian drifted into the past. "Back then, you'd hum

me a lullaby and let me doze off to the sound of your voice."
As soon as the words left his lips, a familiar melody reached his ears. Light and soothing, it calmed his body and mind.
Leaning against the bed, Aurore gazed into the deep crimson dark before her. She hummed the lullaby from her hometown, soft and wistful.
It was a song their mother had crooned when Aurore was just a kid, coaxing her to sleep.
"Go to sleep, go to sleep..."
Lost in the gentle tune, Lumian gradually unwound and slipped under.
.....
Lumian woke up amidst the faint gray fog.
He scoped the room and realized that he wasn't in his sister's room. He was still in his own room.

Chapter 90: Trying Again

Indeed, no matter where I fall asleep, I'll wake up here. Lumian tumbled out of bed and glimpsed at the Fate Appropriator Dirk beside him. No, Fallen Mercury. He paced to the window in the faint gray fog.

He planted his hands on the desk and cast his gaze at the blood-colored "peak."

At the summit of the mountain, the fog was dense and stratified, utterly masking the three-headed, six-armed colossus.

I nearly lost control with just a glance the last time. I really have no idea what to do if I have to face it in the future... Lumian sighed in frustration.

He didn't sink into such emotions for long and quickly broke free because he still had numerous things to do.

Lumian contorted himself into a deranged dance within his bedroom, emitting a distorted spiritual pulse. Combined with the stirred forces of nature, he 'broadcasted' himself in an unspecific direction.

Before long, he sensed approaching entities and saw the translucent forms of the mouth-orifice monster, the shotgun monster, and the skinless monster reflected in his glass window.

Lumian was in no hurry. Following his dance, he withdrew a ritual silver dagger and stabbed the back of his left hand.

A droplet of crimson swiftly surfaced and congealed into a bead atop his skin, guided by his spirituality and the forces of nature.

The trio of creatures shifted but did not dare enter Lumian's abode or attach themselves to him.

Lumian spun around, elevated his left hand and bellowed, "I!"

Shouting in the ancient tongue of Hermes, it caused the room to rock faintly.

Employing his ritual dagger, Lumian collected the droplet of blood and aimed it at the mouth-orifice beast. "I command you! Onto me!"

Again in ancient Hermes. An imperceptible gust blew.

The translucent form of the mouth-orifice monster trembled visibly, as if seized and vigorously shaken by an invisible entity.

Just as Lumian completed his dance, believing it would have no effect, the mouth-orifice monster hurtled into the house and landed upon the ritual silver dagger, devouring the droplet of crimson.

It then convulsed violently as it tunneled into Lumian's body through the silver dagger.

Lumian could not help but gasp, his mind flooded with thoughts of

'So hungry, so hungry, starving, starving.'
He hastily turned and stared at the full-length mirror on his wardrobe. He saw his visage was pallid and tinged cerulean. His maw gaped wildly, resembling a cadaver more than a living being.
Success... Lumian exulted gazing at his reflection as if regarding a stranger.
It felt somewhat alien.
He resisted his intense hunger and attempted to sense the mouth-orifice monster possessing him.
It was like acquiring an additional brain. Much of it brimmed with hunger, bloodlust, madness and more. Instinctively, he had a proclivity to harness its characteristics.
Lumian could utilize his will and spirituality to magnify one of those instincts. It equated to employing the mouth-orifice monster's traits or abilities.
Without a second thought, Lumian chose invisibility.
In the blink of an eye, his reflection vanished from the full-length mirror.
Everything from his body to his clothes to the ritual silver dagger had disappeared.
Lumian took a few steps forward and back, but he couldn't spot any traces of himself in the mirror or glass.
Of course, his footprints and scent remained.
Lumian stuffed the silver dagger Aurore had given him, raised his arms, and punched the air a few times.
With each whooshing punch, the full-body mirror stayed empty until Lumian swung a fist at its surface.
The moment his knuckles connected with the mirror, his outline materialized. His face was pale with a tinge of blue, and his eyes glinted dangerously.
Unbelievable... No matter what I do, the invisibility stays on, but I can't mute it. However, as long as I attack the mirror, I lose invisibility... I thought it was optical invisibility like Aurore said, but it seems to be a result of mysticism... Attacking something forms a bond with it, rendering me invisible to its 'gaze?' Lumian hovered his right fist over the mirror.
After verifying the effects and limits of invisibility, ravenous hunger overwhelmed him. He stomped downstairs into the cellar and found two steaks.
If not for his rationality, he would've sunk his teeth into the dark meat.
Lumian abandoned the ingredients and grabbed the cheese he had stockpiled, realizing he had to fry the steak medium rare with no fire set up.

He didn't care if it was clean or delectable. Like a ghost starved to death, he shoved food into his mouth.
After eating a few cheese slices, Lumian finally satiated his intense hunger.
Looks like this is the downside of the mouth-orifice monster... he evaluated seriously. Luckily, I can still control my body and haven't lost my mind... That thing is obsessed with revenge but overpowered by even greater fear... If I utter 'leave' in ancient Hermes now, it'll bolt faster than anything...
By now, Lumian was sure the mouth-orifice monster's possession had acceptable side effects. Invisibility would become a potent weapon to explore and battle in the dream ruins.
Coupled with Fallen Mercury, he felt his combat ability had more than doubled.
Lumian returned to the dining table, pulled out a chair, and sat down, patiently awaiting the possession's end.
Soon, his spirituality nearly depleted.
He didn't strain himself. He stood up and performed some seemingly insane moves.
It was the same dance to attract monsters. Its purpose was to force the possessing creature out.
Without Lumian's command in ancient Hermes, the mouth-orifice monster's blurry and translucent figure flew out and vanished through the glass window on the first floor without glancing back.
Lumian couldn't help but make a self-deprecating remark. "Don't run so fast. You're acting like I have a cesspit on me."
He knew he could maintain possession for about three minutes given his spirituality. Once invisible, his consumption rate would double.
Of course, that was under normal circumstances. In danger, he could strain himself to last longer. But that risked losing control, best avoided if possible.
Though the mouth-orifice monster had left, Lumian still felt ravenous. He lit the stove and fried the steak medium well.
Then, he picked up his knife and fork and quickly cut, forked it, and put it into his mouth. He felt that the juice locked in the meat was delicious.
Lumian devoured two steaks in under ten minutes, sating his hunger.
Looking at the empty plate, he sighed, "Three minutes of possession needs at least two hours to recover..."
This didn't only mean eradicating hunger, but a recovery of spirituality too.
Lumian knew his current state wasn't fit for exploring. He found

flour, sugar and other bits, using the oven at home to bake biscuits.
With cheese, this would be his main source of fuel in the ruins.
Had he more time, he'd have gotten jerky too--food shepherds often carried. As a Cordu resident, he knew how to make them.
Busy with this, Lumian pondered his dream ruin plans.
First, circle the city wall. Then hunt that flaming beast...
Only by amping up my strength can I better explore and unravel the secrets of the dream...
The flaming monster's strength was at least Sequence 7, and there was a high chance it was from the Hunter pathway. Its various abilities perfectly squashed Lumian. He hadn't planned on dealing with that dude anytime soon, hoping to first seek out prey that was weaker and on par with a Provoker. But now, scoring Fallen Mercury and Invisibility gave him a certain level of hope.
When his spirituality had mostly recovered, Lumian placed the baked biscuits and sliced cheese into a cloth pouch and slung it around his waist.
Then, he seriously wrapped his left hand in layers of white bandages and grabbed the evil dirk called Fallen Mercury.
Hauling his shotgun and axe, Lumian strode towards the door on the first floor with the other stuff he needed.
Suddenly, he had the feeling that he was a fully armed hunter preparing for a dangerous hunt.
Many thoughts surfaced in his mind.
My first move is to track the flaming monster's movements. Then I'll use Invisibility to sneak up on it and stab it with Fallen Mercury.
Before that, I'll hunt a weak monster and steal its bad fate. Then swap that fate with the flaming monster's.
I can't do the sacrificial dance while possessed and half-activate the black thorn symbol. Otherwise, the mouth-orifice monster will bolt from my body immediately. So, how do I get away from the flaming monster after hurting it and wait for the fate swap to finish? It'll easily lock onto me through my traces. Invisibility alone won't cut it...
Lumian hadn't figured out the last part yet. That depended on early intel.
As he opened the door and went into the wilderness, he had an odd feeling.
If I can successfully hunt the flaming monster, my Hunter potion will be fully digested.
...
In the area where he'd met the flaming monster before, Lumian

held his pewter-black dirk in his left hand. He carefully searched for any traces, on high alert for sudden attacks.
After circling cautiously for nearly ten minutes, he finally found signs of the flaming monster.
In a collapsed house's corner, there were black scorch marks on a stone unlike any around it.
Where there's one, there's two. Lumian quickly tracked the flaming monster's location and slowly, cautiously followed its trail.
When the marks were fresh, he stopped and began to dance.

Chapter 91: Scheming

Lumian danced to lure in strange creatures. His objective: to use Invisibility to slip closer and analyze the flaming monster's habits and movements, gathering intel for future hunts.

Within a mere 30 to 40 seconds, he used ancient Hermes to reattach the mouth-orifice creature to himself.

An overwhelming hunger consumed Lumian, compelling him to open his mouth. It was as if his mouth had sprouted vortex-shaped teeth.

Swiftly, he stifled the ravenous and insane thoughts flooding his being, pulled out a small biscuit and a cube of cheese, and shoved them into his mouth, chewing and swallowing.

Simultaneously, he strengthened the mouth-orifice creature's invisibility, causing him to vanish from sight.

Having quelled his hunger, Lumian tried hard to clamp his mouth shut to prevent the aroma of biscuit and cheese from escaping.

He then trailed the flaming monster along the road's edge.

Before long, Lumian spotted the charred monster, its every limb ablaze.

It was constructing a new trap in the clearing from before.

You're already a monster, yet you're still so dedicated? Lumian silently jeered.

Naturally, he understood this was merely an expression of the monster's instinctive behavior.

Lumian dared not approach too closely, halting beside a crumbling wall at the clearing's perimeter.

He studied the flaming monster for a few moments before glancing back at the path he had traversed. He noticed that, although his footprints were faint and concealed in less conspicuous areas, they still existed.

Lumian eyed his current position and hatched a plan.

Closely monitoring the monster's movements, he seized a larger rock and hurled it to the side. As it flew, he pressed his right hand against the decaying wall and vaulted up, landing securely atop the wall.

Crash! Lumian's actions were flawlessly masked by the sound of the rock striking the ground.

After changing his vantage point, Lumian felt much more at ease. Monitoring his dwindling spirituality, he intently observed the flaming monster.

He discerned that the flaming monster's traps were neither concealed nor challenging to detect. They didn't exploit any logical vulnerabilities or inertia-driven movement. They were simple and

exposed.
The most elementary example was the flaming monster stretching a rope slightly above one's ankle between two ruined buildings across the clearing.
Any human or monster with normal vision could easily discover this trap.
At first, Lumian didn't grasp its purpose, but after placing himself in the monster's position, he gradually discerned its potential significance.
The intent of such traps was not to directly harm or ensnare enemies, but to forge an environment that enabled Hunters to exhibit their full potential.
In the heat of battle, one struggled to observe the environment and maintain situational awareness. Constantly distracted by these limitations, they occasionally had to slow down or alter their stance to evade traps. Hunters possessed the unique ability to remain alert to their surroundings at all times and exploit the environment to their advantage.
This disparity widened the gulf between their strengths.
An open conspiracy... Lumian nodded in understanding, recalling Aurore's words.
Suddenly, he perceived the flaming monster as a stern instructor imparting valuable lessons about Hunters to him.
Simultaneously, he remembered the content of Aurore's novel: Stealing from a master is punishable by death!
Eventually, the flaming monster ceased its activity. Its charred face instinctively scanned the vicinity.
Then, it strode towards the edge of the clearing near Lumian, flames dancing from its body.
Following a predetermined route to the next location? Lumian mused to himself, his excitement mounting.
For Hunters, discerning a quarry's path was invaluable.
Most traps lay hidden along such routes!
As the flaming monster ambled, it scrutinized its surroundings and examined the ground, remaining vigilant.
This caused Lumian to furrow his brow. He realized that a higher Sequence Hunter wouldn't be easily handled.
The most effective counter to Beyonders was often individuals or objects of a higher Sequence from the same pathway, even if the gap was only one or two Sequences.
I'm better at your strengths than you are. You may lack what I possess!
If not for his Dancer-related abilities and the Fallen Mercury dirk, Lumian wouldn't have dared to entertain any designs on the

flaming monster.
Seven to eight seconds later, the flaming monster reached the edge of the clearing, approximately five to six meters from the crumbling wall.
As before, the flaming monster's gaze instinctively roved.
It paused, as if observing footprints near the wall's edge that appeared to have been left by someone.
Thump, thump. Lumian's heart pounded involuntarily.
He wasn't prepared to hunt the flaming monster just yet.
Despite the five to six meters between them, Lumian hesitated to kill the enemy with Fallen Mercury, knowing the latter hadn't stored an exchangeable fate.
If a fight erupted, he'd be hunted before he could activate the black thorn symbol!
Lumian struggled to control his heartbeat and breathing. His right hand hovered over the black cloth covering Fallen Mercury's blade, ready to tear it away at any moment.
If he leaped with full force from his current position, he might reach the flaming monster and avoid a long-range battle that favored his opponent.
Two or three seconds ticked by. The flaming monster averted its gaze and moved on.
It didn't seem to have noticed Lumian's footprints.
After covering another ten meters, the flaming monster suddenly spun around.
Flames erupted from its body, condensing into a massive, searing white fireball.
The fireball rocketed like a cannonball toward the spot where Lumian had been perched at the edge of the crumbling wall.
Following his instincts, Lumian, who was crouching on the wall, leaped down to the other side, where the flaming monster had laid its trap.
Boom!
A fiery blast erupted, causing the already unstable wall to collapse.
Upon landing, Lumian rolled twice to avoid falling debris and the shockwave laced with flames.
He immediately sprang back up, maintaining his "invisibility" as he sped through the traps left by the flaming monster and headed toward another exit in the clearing.
The flaming monster couldn't detect its enemy right away, so it focused on searching for clues.
Finally, it spotted a series of faint footprints.
By then, Lumian had reached the rope stretched between two collapsed buildings, easily jumping over it and fleeing the clearing.

He dashed to a natural trap and shook off his pursuer.
Having deactivated his invisibility, Lumian cursed in pain, "Too treacherous, too treacherous! One of these monsters' heads is worth two of Pons's. After finding my footprints, it pretended not to see them and deliberately increased the distance between us, fearing it might be defeated!"
As Lumian cursed, he felt like he had learned something new.
Of course, there were drawbacks to this approach: the increased distance gave Lumian room to escape.
Furthermore, his invisibility meant the flaming monster couldn't lock onto him right away. His chances of escaping were high.
After catching his breath and restoring some energy, Lumian mused while eating biscuits and cheese, "Based on what just happened, as long as I plan carefully and strike at the right moment, I can rely on Invisibility to create distance and escape to a safe location, waiting for the fate exchange to complete."
Lumian's Invisibility would break upon attacking, but as long as he avoided contact, he could use it again.
This valuable insight emerged from his reconnaissance.
However, he also realized a problem. As a Hunter, I didn't bring water when I went 'hunting in the mountains!' I'm so thirsty!
Both cheese and biscuits required water.
The jerky Lumian intended to make in the future fell into this category too.
After resting briefly, he resolved to hunt Noodle Man, strip its bad fate, and store it in Fallen Mercury. He couldn't risk being defenseless in an emergency again.
A puppet's fate also belonged to Fallen Mercury and could be exchanged. But Lumian wasn't a wielder. He couldn't swap his fate with others. If he could, he'd gladly give away the bomb on him.
.....
About thirty minutes later, Lumian tracked down Noodle Man, the grotesque hodgepodge of limbs and features.
Having completed the ritualistic dance in advance, Lumian strode towards Noodle Man openly. As expected, he found Noodle Man prostrate on the fetid ground, trembling uncontrollably.
Very obedient... Lumian praised, gripping an iron-black axe in his right hand and the pewter-black Fallen Mercury dirk in his left.
Though Fallen Mercury dirk's malignant aura seeped into Lumian's skin even without contact, he had long grown immune to its corrupting influence. What might drive ordinary Beyonders to losing control was nothing to him.
Lumian glowered at the pathetic Noodle Man cowering before him, retracting his gaze from the gnashing maw on its forehead.

"According to Aurore, death is a mercy for your kind. The sooner you expire, the sooner your suffering will end."
As he spoke, Lumian crouched and plunged the pewter-black dirk deep into the back of Noodle Man's neck.
Noodle Man spasmed, but did not resist or struggle.
Lumian wrenched the dirk free and gripped his axe, swinging the weapon down with fluid grace.
The axehead cleaved through flesh and bone, sending Noodle Man's head tumbling across the ground with Fallen Mercury's swipe.
Blood erupted from the severed neck, splattering everywhere.
Noodle Man's twitching remains soon fell still, lifeless at last.
Lumian strode over to the head and retrieved FalleN mercury with his left hand.
In the fleeting second between breaths, an illusory river shimmered before his eyes.
The river appeared to be constructed from intricate mercury symbols, and each symbol seemed formed by the river itself.
At once, the river's branches disappeared, leaving only the primary current. It fractured midway and kinked as if wanting to double back to its source but for now could not prevail.

Chapter 92: Stripping Fate

Lumian couldn't grasp the meaning of the illusory river he saw or sensed. All he could surmise was that it symbolized fate. Guided by Fallen Mercury's instincts, he lifted the blade's tip and aimed it at a mercury symbol within the river.

As soon as he made contact with the mercury river, a series of scenes flashed through Lumian's mind: Noodle Man performing an enigmatic sacrificial dance; Noodle Man cowering before the black thorn symbol and prostrating itself; Noodle Man gathering the scattered flesh and blood throughout the dream ruins to satiate its hunger; Noodle Man attempting to approach the 'city wall' circle, but retreating each time as if afraid of something; Noodle Man's head severed by an axe...

Is this its entire existence since the loop began? Lumian realized this as he tried to stab the tip of Fallen Mercury at the mercury symbol representing Noodle Man's demise--the end of the illusory river.

It was too immense and heavy for him to succeed.

At that moment, the mercury symbol started to dissipate, and the illusory river gradually faded. The images in Lumian's mind grew hazy.

There's a time limit? Lumian didn't dare to dawdle. Adhering to the principle of proximity, he aimed the dark pewter dirk at Noodle Man's fate of succumbing to the black thorn symbol.

The mercury symbol, seemingly formed by the river's entanglement, was pried open, condensing into a droplet that seeped into the blade of Fallen Mercury.

In the next instant, the illusory river vanished entirely, preventing Lumian from witnessing Noodle Man's fate again.

He glanced down at Fallen Mercury and noticed the heretic symbols on the pewter-black blade undulating gently like water, as though infused with some vital force.

They had been mesmerizing from the start, but now they appeared even more sinister.

"Success..." Lumian whispered to himself in relief.

Fallen Mercury was now complete.

In the future, as long as he could wound the flaming monster with this heretic dirk in battle, he could swap the monster's fate of cowering before the black thorn symbol with the former.

Lumian wrapped the blade of Fallen Mercury in black cloth and sheathed it in his belt. He dealt with Noodle Man's corpse briefly, moving it into a half-collapsed building. He destroyed the building's last support, allowing rubble and wood to fall, burying everything inside.

After this, Lumian circled back to where the flaming monster had appeared.
This time, he didn't approach for observation. Instead, he searched for footprints and other traces, taking time to identify which ones the target left while deliberately circling around.
After nearly two hours, Lumian gradually deciphered the flaming monster's habits and patterns. A mental hunting map emerged.
He spent some time surveying the predetermined battlefields, seeking natural traps to exploit.
Eventually, Lumian rubbed his forehead and decided to delve deeper into the ruins while he still had energy, gathering information for future explorations.
He remained vigilant and performed the sacrificial dance again, partially triggering the black thorn symbol.
With the 'amulet' in hand, Lumian quickly followed the same path as before.
He encountered monsters along the way, but they either fled before attacking or vanished from sight at a distance. The deeper he went, the more similar situations occurred.
Finally, when the burning sensation in his chest from the second sacrificial dance subsided, Lumian spotted the 'city wall' composed of twisted houses once more.
He rested a while, waiting for his spirituality to recover before performing the sacrificial dance again.
After the dance, sometimes forceful, sometimes graceful, Lumian headed in the direction where he found Fallen Mercury, the black thorn symbol activated.
After passing through the room where the flames had been extinguished, he slowed his pace, wary of a sudden assault.
After walking a while, Lumian noticed the light ahead had dimmed considerably. It was as if a massive creature high in the sky blocked the light, or the sun was obscured by something.
Lumian instinctively looked up, but saw only thick fog.
Unable to determine the cause, he could only draw Fallen Mercury and cautiously proceed.
In a moment, it felt as if he had transitioned from day to night.
Of course, this was an exaggeration. Lumian thought it more accurate to liken the foggy weather to a place shrouded in dark clouds.
Almost simultaneously, he yawned involuntarily, his exhaustion intensifying.
No, I can't sleep... Lumian forced himself to keep his eyes open as he retreated from the shadowy base of the mountain.
His mental state improved significantly. Although still tired, he

could endure it.
You fall asleep the moment you enter. The deeper you go, the sleepier you become? Lumian mused silently. He turned and walked in another direction.
After another sacrificial dance, he arrived at an unfamiliar area.
To his right were 'walls' stacked with doors and windows. To his left lay a wasteland connected to the circle of building ruins, and ahead stood brown trees.
In the desolate ruins, the trees seemed incredibly resilient. They intertwined and embraced each other, forming a wooden wall five to six meters tall.
This wooden wall had numerous green leaves and branches, a stark contrast to the deathly silence and desolation surrounding it.
If it hadn't blocked the path to the back of the city wall, Lumian might have praised its tenacious vitality. But now, he could only express his dissatisfaction with the crude gesture of raising two middle fingers.
He could have chosen to take a detour and enter from the other side of the dream ruins, but he wasn't familiar with that area. His spirituality was nearly depleted, so there was no need to take the risk.
Lumian yawned unabashedly, his chest still burning as he retraced his steps.
.....
As Lumian awoke, the first light of dawn had already crept through the thick curtains, casting an outline of the desk, chair, wardrobe, and other furnishings within the room.
Still early, he thought, glancing over at Aurore beside him.
Aurore's blonde hair lay strewn across the white pillow, her eyes closed in peaceful slumber.
Her right hand gripped the edge of the blanket, occasionally attempting to turn over but stopping instinctively. Her brow furrowed before gradually smoothing out.
Lumian had a good idea why his sister reacted this way.
She had hidden numerous bottles within her nightgown as a precaution. Sleeping on her side or stomach would undoubtedly cause her harm.
How exhausting, Lumian sighed inwardly, his expression tender and his heart at ease.
After a moment, he carefully slid out of bed and left the bedroom.
He moved toward a side balcony that led to the rooftop. Facing the distant crimson sky, he stretched his body.
Within a minute, Valentine emerged from his room and stood in the corridor.

"Are you also greeting the sun?" he asked, his usual cold demeanor replaced with warmth and approval.
Can I say no? Lumian smiled. "That's right."
Satisfied, Valentine stepped onto the balcony and stood tall, facing the rising sun.
He spread his arms wide, lifted his face toward the sky, and whispered, "Praise the Sun!"
With no other choice, Lumian mimicked the gesture. "Praise the Sun!"
Valentine lowered his arms and crossed them over his chest. After a moment of silent prayer, he opened his eyes and said to Lumian, "If the loop is successfully resolved, I'll introduce you to the bishop of DariÃ¨ge. Or would you prefer Bigorre?"
"I prefer Trier," Lumian answered, smiling. "But where I go isn't up to me. It's up to my sister."
Valentine nodded and dropped the subject. He turned back toward the corridor and began patrolling.
Nothing happened until eight o'clock. The pair then went downstairs and prepared breakfast together.
Soon after, Ryan joined them to help. Leah woke up just before nine, leaving Aurore still asleep.
Ryan bit into his toast and asked Lumian, "Do you have any plans for today?"
Lumian hesitated before responding, "We should leave someone at home. Aurore can't be left to face a potential attack alone. The remaining two will accompany me to stock up on food and fetch some water. We must hold out until the twelfth night."
Cordu lacked a proper water supply. Aurore had installed a water tank on the roof during her renovations. As long as it was regularly filled and disinfected, it was as good as having running water.
"Yes, we need to do all this before Lent," Ryan agreed.
Lumian smiled brightly. "By the way, we should visit Madame Pualis and ask if she can help us investigate the dead Warlock and the owl in the tomb."
As expected, Valentine frowned, and Ryan's smile stiffened.
Leah sipped her water and offered a smile. "I'll stay with Aurore."
"No problem," Lumian agreed on behalf of Ryan and Valentine.
With no other choice, the two men acquiesced to visit the administrator's residence that morning.
Following breakfast, the trio exited the semi-subterranean two-story building and made their way toward Ol' Tavern.
They passed Shepherd Pierre Berry's home along the way.
Lumian's heart raced as he suggested to Ryan and Valentine, "Let's

check on the three sheep."
He recalled the bleating he had heard the night before.
Understanding his meaning, Ryan and Valentine offered no objection.
They circled around to the rear of the Berrys' home, only to find an empty sheep pen.
The three sheep were gone.

Chapter 93: An Early Sacrifice

Gazing at the empty sheep pen littered with hay and dung, Ryan furrowed his brow and said, "Did they really fix the underground altar so quickly?"

He suspected the three missing sheep had been taken for sacrifice.

"Maybe these heretics have some special powers," Valentine replied with disdain.

As Lumian listened to their conversation, he suddenly remembered the faint sound of a sheep's bleating he heard the night before.

Could it have been one of the sheep being sacrificed? Puzzled, he shared his suspicion with Ryan and Valentine.

"That seems unlikely," Ryan dismissed, shaking his head. "The cathedral is hundreds of meters from your house, and the altar is underground."

What he meant was that even with a Hunter's enhanced hearing, it would be impossible to hear anything from the cathedral's underground.

Lumian shared that doubt, but couldn't explain why he heard the bleating. Simultaneously, a distinct burning sensation appeared in his chest as the black thorn symbol partially activated.

There was no way to fake this!

Burning sensation... Lumian's heart raced, recalling something the mysterious woman had said.

Pray to yourself... the principle of proximity...

Thinking back to the ritual that invoked Dancer's power and the black thorn symbol, he formed a new hypothesis.

He heard the sheep bleating during the sacrifice because of mysticism!

In simpler terms, when the padre and his group performed their ritual and prayed to the hidden being, the principle of proximity also targeted the corruption in Lumian's body, partially triggering the black thorn symbol. As a result, Lumian could faintly hear the sheep's cries from afar.

Him being unable to respond or knowing how—with the corruption now sealed by the owner of the bluish-black pattern—the padre's ritual ultimately 'contacted' the hidden entity.

After the ritual, the burning sensation in Lumian's chest faded.

It seems no invisible, strange power had invaded Aurore's room last night. The anomaly in my body was just half-activated by the padre's ritual... Lumian roughly understood how events had unfolded.

At that moment, Ryan warned his companions, "It appears our

investigation of the cathedral's underground has alarmed the padre and his people. They've found a way to repair the altar and pray for strength ahead of time. From now on, we need to be extra vigilant. Don't assume things will only turn dangerous as Lent approaches."
"If I weren't worried about restarting the loop, I'd have dealt with them already!" Valentine spat hatefully.
Then, he added gloomily, "Can you stop calling that servant of the evil god a padre? He's not worthy!"
Why was he a padre if he wasn't worthy? Lumian dared not voice his thoughts.
He wasn't afraid to voice his thoughts; but wanting to maintain his image in Valentine's eyes, he kept silent. After all, he might need to persuade this fanatic to do something later, like using his suicide to verify the essence of the cycle.
Ryan nodded.
"Let's visit Madame Pualis as soon as possible to replenish our supplies. We should stay inside as much as we can in the future."
Lumian said nothing more, leaving Shepherd Pierre Berry's house through the back door and heading towards the castle on the hill.
Passing through the vibrant garden, the trio approached the partially opened door and informed the red-coated, white-panted manservant, "We need to see Madame Pualis."
"Wait a moment." The valet glanced at Ryan and Valentine before swiftly turning and vanishing through the door.
Soon after, the pale-faced 'midwife' in a grayish-white dress emerged.
Compared to last time, her face was even paler, and her eyes were so blank that it made one's heart turn cold.
Had Lumian not informed Ryan and Valentine beforehand that the 'midwife' wasn't 'dead,' they would have been shocked.
They had seen plenty of dead people turn into zombies. The Solar High Priest specialized in such matters. Valentine had purified dozens of similar cases, but it was beyond their understanding how a person diced into pieces could revert to their original appearance and seem more alive than dead.
The 'midwife' spoke in a monotone.
"Madame doesn't want to see you. Please leave."
"We have urgent matters," Lumian insisted. "Isn't Madame Pualis concerned that the person underground will disrupt her plans?"
The 'midwife' maintained her tone.
"Madame says it won't affect her."
Hearing this, a chill ran down Lumian's spine.
It meant they would have a hard time getting Madame Pualis' help

again.
Lumian smiled without displaying frustration or disappointment. Looking at the 'midwife,' he said, "But we might explore the tomb."
He implied that during the exploration, either side could encounter trouble, triggering the loop to restart prematurely.
Unfazed, the 'midwife' remained stiff and blank.
"You can try, but you'll only be disappointed."
What does she mean? Lumian couldn't grasp Madame Pualis' message.
Does she mean they could explore all they wanted, and she would offer some help at crucial moments, but they wouldn't find any valuable clues? The more Lumian pondered, the more he doubted that was her intended meaning. Otherwise, she wouldn't have refused their meeting request through the 'midwife.'
Before Lumian could consider other possibilities, Ryan thoughtfully asked, "Is Madame Pualis trying to tell us that the person in the tomb can easily control us and prevent our investigation without triggering the loop?"
"Yes." The 'midwife' nodded slowly, turned, and retreated deeper into the castle.
Lumian, Valentine, and Ryan exchanged glances and left, feeling helpless.
Their next stop was Ol' Tavern, where they could purchase plenty of provisions and barrels of cheap wine.
Compared to potable water that spoiled easily, wine was more stable. As long as its alcohol content wasn't too high, it could substitute for water.
Entering Ol' Tavern, Lumian scanned the room but didn't spot the mysterious woman.
Disappointed, he focused on the bar counter, telling tavern owner Maurice Bénet what they needed.
After Ryan and Valentine hauled out wine barrels, Lumian lowered his voice and inquired, "Where's the other lady?"
Maurice Bénet shook his head.
"I don't know. Maybe she's in her room, somewhere else in the village, or even in Liège. She rented the room until the 9th. She's free to do as she pleases."
The 9th? The twelfth night? Lumian nodded thoughtfully.
April 9th was the so-called twelfth night that he and Aurore had deduced.
This also confirmed that March 29th was indeed the loop's first day.
If Ryan and the two other foreigners hadn't happened to enter Cordu on a particular cycle's first day, the loop would immediately

restart and commence on March 29th whenever outsiders invaded the area.
"Damn." Lumian slapped his forehead and told the tavern owner, Maurice Bénet, "My stomach's acting up. I need the restroom. Tell them to wait for me."
Maurice Bénet's expression seemed to say: *What are you up to now?*
"Don't mess with me!"
The downside of having a bad reputation rears its ugly head once more... Lumian chuckled.
"Don't worry, I'm really just using the restroom!"
As he spoke, he waved and sprinted toward the staircase.
He did want to use the restroom, but he was heading for the one upstairs.
Maurice Bénet glanced at his retreating figure and muttered, "Spring is here, and this scoundrel's hormones are raging..."
His voice barely reached Lumian's ears.
Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian approached the restroom and positioned himself in front of the mysterious lady's room.
Knock, knock, knock. He rapped on the door.
No answer.
Noticing the absence of a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the handle, Lumian knocked twice more, each time louder than before.
Unfortunately, the mysterious lady never showed.
Lumian pondered for a moment before producing a slim wire and jiggling it in the keyhole.
The door creaked open, revealing an empty room.
The bed's blanket lay neatly folded, as though no one had occupied the space recently.
Lumian exhaled quietly and closed the door without venturing inside.
...
In the afternoon, the siblings congregated in Aurore's bedroom under the guise of instructing Lumian in the art of Hermes to swiftly enhance his strength.
Lumian kept his voice low as he recounted his excursion into the dream ruins the previous night. At last, he inquired, "Anything to add? About hunting the flaming monster?"
Though he was armed with Fallen Mercury and Invisibility, his confidence in hunting the flaming beast remained low.
It was a Sequence of the Hunter pathway that had experienced a qualitative transformation!
Aurore chuckled.
"You've covered all the bases. The only thing I can add is..."

She lifted her hands, formed fists, and shook them gently.
"Break a leg!"
"..." Lumian felt defeated by his sister's jest.
However, the tension in his chest subsided.
Aurore then said, "What remains are some clichéd words: be careful, be careful, be very careful."
She sighed.
"It's a shame the mysterious lady isn't here. Otherwise, I could've crafted some simple, supplementary talismans, along with the Integrity Brooch, and had them brought into your dream."
"That's true." While Lumian felt disappointed, he wasn't disheartened. He had no intention of giving up.
...
At 9:50 pm, Lumian slid out of Aurore's bedroom and stalked down the hallway towards the washroom.
He intended to relieve himself before beginning his night watch.
Bathed in the crimson glow of the moon, the washroom was shrouded in darkness. Only the toilet was faintly visible.
Lumian bent over and unfastened his belt.
Behind him, the shadow on the wall abruptly writhed and morphed into a silhouette brandishing an axe high above its head!

Chapter 94: Attack

Lumian's eyes were narrowed, his body tensing as he sensed the pores on his skin open. An overwhelming premonition of danger washed over him.

In the dream ruins, he'd had no shortage of similar experiences. Instantly, he halted and tumbled to the side, like a boneless sack of flesh.

A whistling wind filled his ears as a razor-sharp axe grazed his body, slicing through the air.

Lumian hit the ground with a thud, attempting to roll to his feet. But pale-white and pitch-black, eerie arms extended from the surrounding shadows, grabbing his clothes and coiling around his body.

The cold sensation and stiffness seeped into Lumian's flesh. Twisting wildly, trying to escape the restraints with his powerful agility, he shouted, "Help..."

Two malicious, bumpy palms smothered his mouth, stifling his voice abruptly, leaving only a whimper.

Simultaneously, Lumian glimpsed an elongated humanoid shadow on the wall, raising the axe at him.

Clang!

A two-handed broadsword of pure light blocked the axe's slash.

Ryan was the first to rush over, not bothering with his Dawn Armor, and simply summoned a Sword of Dawn.

The shadowy axe took on a heavy, sharp, and dark appearance the moment it detached from the wall.

The second person to arrive at the washroom door was Leah, who had been in the opposite study. The silver bells on her veil and boots tinkled softly.

Leah raised her right palm and aimed her silver revolver at the strange arms grabbing Lumian.

They tightened, as if trying to drag Lumian into the shadows.

Blue blood vessels bulged from Lumian's neck, forehead, and hands, straining with all his might.

Yet, he couldn't fend off the pale-white and pitch-black arms. His body dissolved into the shadows piece by piece.

Bang!

Leah fired, and a golden bullet wrapped in blazing flames struck a pitch-black arm that seemed to drip ink.

The arm ignited, quickly releasing Lumian's neck and retreating into the shadowy corner.

Aurore arrived at the washroom to find such a scene.

Seeing a third of her brother's body thinned and darkened into a

shadow, his expression growing increasingly rigid, Aurore wasted no time. She pulled iron-black materials from her hidden pocket and sprinkled the powder at Lumian, her light-blue eyes darkening.
Lumian felt an invisible hand grasp him and pull him toward Aurore.
He recalled his sister using a similar spell before, but it had pushed him away—this time, she yanked him closer.
The colossal hand's strength equaled that of the sinister arms, stopping Lumian's slide into the shadows.
Clang! Clang! Clang!
Ryan drove the figure with the sharp axe back into the wall.
The next second, Valentine appeared behind Leah and Aurore.
Witnessing Lumian's state, he spread his arms wide.
Golden illusory flames materialized around Lumian, incinerating countless wicked arms.
The pitch-black or pale-white arms either melted like candles or evaporated into black wisps of smoke.
Within seconds, four-fifths of the strange arms grabbing Lumian vanished.
The remaining arms struggled to resist the invisible hand and Lumian's efforts, releasing him one after another.
Feeling the grip on him loosen, Lumian was pulled by the invisible hand, half-flying and half-pouncing toward Aurore.
As the pitch-black and pale-white arms retracted, the axe-wielding figure froze on the wall, merging with the surrounding shadows, leaving no trace.
Lumian stood and surveyed the area, sneering.
"Is that it? Aren't you looking down on us by only sending one person?"
Aurore glared at him.
"Don't speak!"
How could he utter such ill-omened words at a time like this?
As Aurore's voice echoed in the corridor, a black, spiked vine, abnormally thick as if from the Abyss, descended from the study's ceiling.
At its top bloomed a massive, blood-red flower with a foul odor.
The flower expanded, as if stretching its mouth to the limit.
It suddenly engulfed Leah's head and writhed frantically.
As it chewed, the object in its mouth turned into a thin piece of paper and was shredded.
Immediately after, the radiant broadsword of light flew from the washroom, impaling the massive evil flower to the wall.
Streams of bright red blood oozed from the sword, evaporating into

mist.
Simultaneously, tendrils of black vines cascaded from the ceiling of the Lumian residence, enveloping the walls and sealing the windows with enormous red blossoms.
Aurore swiftly produced a pearl-like powder and tossed it into the air, mingling it with summoned natural forces.
An unseen warm breeze blew, causing the black vines to wither and lose their vigor, no longer able to support the vivid red flowers suspended in midair.
The wilted vines dangled lifelessly from the second floor.
Not a bad result... Aurore mused to herself.
She had obtained the spell from a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Intended as a gardening spell for weeding, Aurore had acquired it at a bargain price, thinking it would be useful someday. Typically, it was used to clear weeds from building walls, but today it proved invaluable.
Nonetheless, the abyssal black vines were unnaturally resilient. They merely withered and didn't perish instantly.
This bought time for Valentine, who summoned the golden and illusory Fire of Light to incinerate the vile creatures in the corridor and rooms.
Ryan then flooded the area with the pure Sunrise Gleam, banishing all evil and obliterating all illusions.
Confronted with this situation he was powerless in, Hunter Lumian stifled his urge to perform the enigmatic dance. He observed his sister and the three outsiders collaborate to eradicate the anomaly that had invaded the second floor.
Soon, the black vines and red flowers disintegrated into smoke.
But Leah's veil and the silver bells on her boots continued to jingle, signaling that danger still lurked.
Lumian swiftly surveyed the scene and sniffed.
"The air doesn't smell right..."
A faint, sweet scent lingered.
"I feel a little dizzy and want to sleep," Leah confessed her unease.
The fumes from the burning vines and flowers contain an anesthetic? How sinister! Aurore, possessing extensive mysticism knowledge, acted promptly.
She produced a handful of transparent powder and scattered it forward.
A fierce wind materialized from nowhere, gusting through every corner of the second floor.
Ryan, Lumian, Valentine, and Leah dashed into separate rooms, throwing open the windows that had been sealed by the black vines.

As the innocuous wind subsided, Aurore turned to Lumian and inquired, "And now?"
Lumian sniffed cautiously. "Don't smell it anymore."
"I feel better, too," Leah chimed in.
At that moment, the silver bells on her veil and boots ceased their movement.
The crisis was averted.
"A probing attack from the padre and company?" Aurore speculated.
Lumian glanced at Valentine, who appeared troubled.
"Could be Guillaume Bénet, who just received a boon, or the already powerful Shepherd Pierre Berry."
Valentine's expression softened at Lumian's choice of words.
Ryan surveyed the area and declared in a deep voice, "Whichever the case, we must heighten our vigilance. From now on, let's split into two groups for shifts. We'll alternate between resting and standing guard, day or night."
A single guard risked being ambushed without timely assistance.
"No problem." Aurore and Lumian exchanged glances before adding, "I'll be in the same group as my brother."
Ryan and the others didn't object.
Over the next few days, the two groups maintained a watchful eye in six-hour rotations. Although nothing transpired, as Lent drew near, they all felt the impending danger, anticipating relentless waves of peril.
During this period, Lumian continued exploring the dream while resting.
He didn't immediately hunt the flaming monster. Instead, he suppressed his impatience and sought to understand the creature's patterns.
With his Invisibility, long-range tracking, daily observation, and ample patience, Lumian finally gleaned the information he desired.
The flaming monster would set traps in the dream clearing each morning, practicing techniques it had mastered for 45 to 90 minutes. It would then follow a fixed route into a flesh-strewn area to replenish its energy.
Its afternoon activities were unpredictable, mainly patrolling its territory via different paths. Lumian had yet to discern its criteria for choosing routes.
In the evening, it would retrace the fixed route and re-enter the hunting zone.
Lumian remained ignorant of its nocturnal activities. He had only spent a maximum of six hours in the dream ruins and never

ventured there at night.
...
The night before Lent.
Lumian jolted awake in the hazy gray fog of the dreamscape bedroom. He glanced at Fallen Mercury beside him and his mind snapped into sharp focus.
This was the night. He would hunt down the flaming monster.

Chapter 95: An "Out in the Open" Ambush

Lumian meticulously wrapped his left hand in layers of white bandages. He gathered his supplies: Fallen Mercury, his iron-black axe, gray amber perfume, biscuits, cheese, bloodied mutton chops, rope for traps, and a bag of cooled boiled water. Slipping his shotgun over his shoulder, he left his semi-subterranean dwelling.

Through the thin gray fog, he ventured into a barren wasteland, riddled with cracks. He entered the dreamlike ruins and strode toward the clearing where the flaming monster often lurked.

Hearing a distant noise, Lumian veered towards a path he anticipated the creature would take, arriving at a natural trap he'd discovered earlier.

A deep pit lay beside the road, with collapsed walls to the front and left. Stacked rocks bordered the right side, and behind it, a mostly collapsed house loomed.

Such a trap was difficult to spot. Lumian had found it only after scouring the area multiple times.

He crouched behind the pit, tossing in a few sharpened wooden stakes. He covered it with a rope net he'd woven earlier and camouflaged it with soil.

With the simple trap set, he placed his bait: two blood-soaked lamb chops, half on solid ground and half suspended above the pit.

Lumian stepped back, assessing the precarious balance. He retreated into the mostly collapsed house, perching himself on the remains of an outer wall.

He adjusted his position to watch the trap without being seen by passing monsters.

Next, he took out the gray amber perfume and sprayed it on the wall.

A delicate, sweet scent wafted through the air, carried by sporadic gusts of wind that blew through the ruins.

The fragrance clung to the wall and to Lumian.

Without hesitation, he leaped away, looping back to the path where the flaming monster would appear, positioning himself closer to its hunting grounds.

Once more, he changed direction, crossing the path and entering the ruins of a building opposite.

Reaching the rear of the crumbling structure, he stopped, leaned against the wall, and waited.

As with his strategy against the shotgun monster, Lumian never expected his trap to fool the flaming monster or wound it severely.

These decoys and alarms targeted the creature's keen senses, observation, and behavior.

Only a Hunter knew how to exploit a Hunter's strengths!
Of course, all this relied on the target operating primarily on instinct, its intelligence limited to combat.
Leaning against the wall, Lumian gripped Fallen Mercury in his bandaged left hand, tearing off the pitch-black cloth shrouding its surface.
He couldn't know how long it would take for the flaming monster to arrive; all he could do was be patient.
Patience was his strong suit—a remnant from his vagrant days.
Time crawled by. Unseen by Lumian, a charred, flame-tinged monster entered the path.
After walking over 20 meters, its nose twitched.
It detected the faint scent of blood.
The monster didn't immediately turn. As it continued, it surreptitiously scanned the source of the smell.
Passing the collapsed wall, the bloody lamb chops caught its eye.
Tempting food, but the flaming monster resisted its instincts, not devouring the bait.
It pressed on, slowing its pace.
Soon, an unusual fragrance filled its nostrils.
It instantly deduced the meat was a trap and a Hunter lay in ambush nearby.
This Hunter seemed different from the one who had previously observed it while invisible. It lacked sufficient knowledge of Hunters and hadn't masked its scent beforehand.
Taking a few more steps, the flaming monster used the fragrance and subtle footprints to pinpoint the enemy hiding on the outer wall of the building behind the trap.
Feigning ignorance, it increased its distance by another seven to eight meters.
Suddenly, it whirled around, its scarlet flames rapidly condensing into a fireball tinged with white.
Boom!
With a flick of its right palm, the fireball hurtled towards Lumian's 'ambush' location, collapsing the outer wall and causing the house to shudder.
Hearing the explosion from a distance, Lumian abandoned his hiding spot, darting into the clearing, his movements a wild, distorted dance.
The explosion was like a signal flare, a stark reminder for him to swiftly ready the second phase of the trap.
Lumian and Aurore had devised this intricate plan, luring their prey into sending out their own signal flares.
In the midst of his mesmerizing dance, Lumian detected the hazy

forms of the mouth-orifice monster, the shotgun monster, and the skinless monster.
By then, the flaming monster had already approached the collapsed wall, searching for any trace of its enemy.
Lumian danced for another ten to twenty seconds, his movements growing more intense. He drew out the ritual silver dagger with his right hand, making a small incision on his left wrist.
A single drop of blood emerged, congealing into a tiny sphere.
Lumian stepped forward, pivoted, and snatched up the blood droplet, aiming it at the mouth-orifice monster.
"I!"
He uttered the word in ancient Hermes, his voice barely above a whisper.
At that moment, the flaming monster had discovered the faint footprints Lumian had left behind. Catching a whiff of a subtle scent, it started tracking him.
Quickly shouting his follow-up command, Lumian watched as the mouth-orifice monster swallowed the blood droplet from the tip of the silver dagger and entered his body.
A wave of madness, bloodlust, cruel intent, and ravenous hunger washed over him.
Lumian fought back the discomfort, hastily bandaging his insignificant wound with a white strip he'd brought along.
Next, he popped a piece of cheese into his mouth, chewing and swallowing to make sure the residual gray amber scent on his body would mask any other mingled odors.
Throughout this process, Lumian sprinted to the edge of the road and halted at an inconspicuous spot.
He clenched his jaw tight and spun around, carefully retracing his steps along his previous path.
Relying on a Hunter's observation skills and Dancer's exaggerated flexibility, Lumian made sure to leave only faint footprints and no additional marks.
It wasn't long before he reached the center of the road and stopped.
Maintaining his invisibility, Lumian remained in plain sight on the road.
He waited, using shallow Cogitation and constant suspension to suppress any thoughts of attacking the flaming monster, a rudimentary way to disrupt its danger premonition.
His inspiration came from a Hunter's keen self-awareness.
Aurore had once written about the tactic of retracing one's footsteps to lie in ambush mid-road in a novel.
After seven or eight seconds, the flaming monster's pitch-black form appeared in Lumian's sight. Utilizing his uncanny flexibility,

he twisted his body to observe the approaching target.
The flaming monster followed the faint footprints and scent left behind by its enemy. Uninterrupted, it continued its pursuit.
Once back on the main road, it sniffed the air, unsurprised to detect a mild fragrance.
It instinctively lowered its head and found the inconspicuous footprints.
But it found no trace of traps in the vicinity.
Without hesitation, the flaming monster tracked the footprints to the other side of the road.
The charred face and displaced eyeballs loomed larger and clearer in Lumian's sight.
Holding his breath, Lumian didn't disrupt his Cogitation again, striving to empty his mind.
Five meters, three meters, one meter... He lunged at the target, raising the Fallen Mercury in his left hand for a swift slash!
He didn't wait to close the gap further, fearing that it would trigger the prey's danger sense and prompt evasive maneuvers.
The flaming monster suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of danger.
Without thinking, it leaped to the side.
Simultaneously, its vision captured Lumian's figure, attacking with a pewter-black dirk in his bandaged left hand.
They were so close that despite the flaming monster's reaction, evasion was impossible. Lumian collided with it.
With a tearing sound, Fallen Mercury's sharp blade sank into the flaming monster's right chest.
The fate extracted from Noodle Man infiltrated the target's body as an illusory mercury bead.
Meanwhile, a river of countless intricate mercury symbols briefly surfaced. Some of the destinies rapidly converged towards the pewter-black blade.
Lumian didn't bother selecting the destiny to exchange, letting Fallen Mercury do as it wished.
Boom!
The monster's flames erupted.
The forceful shockwave hurled Lumian and his Fallen Mercury away. Crimson flames ignited his clothes and scorched his facial skin.
Lumian bore the searing pain, twisting his waist midair to alter his trajectory.
As soon as he landed, he sprang to his feet and fled.
However, unable to re-enter the Invisibility state until the flames were extinguished, he remained visible.

Boom!
Despite his serpentine sprint, Lumian was still knocked off his feet by the fireball's aftershock. His back throbbed with numbing pain.
He struggled to his feet, scrambling away from the path and into the ruins where he had been hiding before.
The flaming monster pursued Lumian, who was unable to turn invisible once more.

Chapter 96: Prey and Hunter

The flaming monster pursued relentlessly, hurling crimson fireballs that blasted craters in the earth. Lumian was thrown off balance multiple times.

Flames licked at the charred logs that littered the desolate landscape, casting flickering red light in every direction.

Lumian barely spared a thought for the fire still consuming his clothes. Gritting his teeth against the searing pain, he was sent sprawling by the shockwaves of detonation after detonation. He staggered to his feet and careened wildly towards his destination —veering left, then right, arcing and darting straight ahead.

Mercifully, he didn't have far to go based on his plan. Just as he felt the taste of blood in his mouth and his body threatened to give out, a dilapidated building loomed before him.

Boom!

Lumian contorted his body mid-stride, narrowly avoiding a fireball. The scarlet projectile exploded just ahead, unleashing a hellish maelstrom of flames.

Seizing the moment, Lumian dropped to the ground and rolled beneath the worst of the conflagration. With the momentum, he tumbled into the partially collapsed structure.

The flaming monster halted and hesitated, wary of pursuing its prey into a potential death trap.

It watched as Lumian rolled deeper into the building, summoning a swarm of red Fire Ravens around it.

Their screeches filled the air as they took flight. Half of them dove towards the building's support beams, while the others bore down on Lumian from all sides.

These avian flames were unerring, constantly adjusting their trajectories to match Lumian's movements.

In that instant, the flaming monster could almost see its enemy's charred remains.

Fire Ravens were far more difficult to dodge than mere fireballs!

And then, Lumian disappeared from the monster's view.

He had rolled into a well-preserved basement.

Bang!

Lumian slammed the wooden door shut and leaped aside, using the force of the impact.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! The scarlet Fire Ravens slammed into the door.

Boom!

The heavy door disintegrated into flaming splinters.

Rumble!

The remaining Fire Ravens struck their intended targets, bringing down the decaying structure in a torrent of debris.
Stone, wood, and dust engulfed the area, entombing the basement.
Lumian had already taken refuge in a corner, using the accumulated dirt to smother the flames that clung to him.
But he was still badly burned, his internal organs battered by the force of the explosions. Without swift medical attention, he wouldn't last another day.
The flaming monster's attack had been devastating, even more potent than Ryan sans his Hurricane of Light!
Lumian had intended to use Invisibility to elude the flaming monster, slipping into the basement to perform his enigmatic sacrificial dance, activating the black thorn symbol on his chest to terrify his foe. He'd planned to bide his time for Fallen Mercury to complete the exchange of fate. But the persistent fire had thwarted his Invisibility, nearly costing him his life.
The one consolation was that he had a backup plan in the event he couldn't escape the monster's pursuit, nor could he perform his sacrificial dance in peace.
He'd even considered collapsing the building to bury the basement and buy time, but the flaming monster had done the job for him.
Phew... Exhaling deeply, Lumian sat cross-legged.
He retrieved the bottle of gray amber perfume from Aurore, unscrewed the cap, and placed it before him.
Outside the demolished building, the flaming monster's gaze cut through the swirling dust, searching for any trace of its quarry.
It was certain that the cunning intruder wouldn't have been buried alive so easily.
Given the complexity of the traps he'd laid and his intimate knowledge of the ruins, he must have left himself an escape route!
The flaming monster wasn't particularly intelligent, but its Hunter's instincts led it to circle the collapsed building.
In less than ten seconds, it discovered a hidden cave entrance angling downward.
The opening was concealed by debris from the fallen structure, sheltered from the ensuing collapse. It was difficult to spot and tucked away in a discreet location.
The monster raised its right hand, conjuring a fist-sized white fireball in its palm.
With a sudden lunge, it hurled the fireball down the passageway.
The flames streaked through the air, penetrated the basement, and collided with the far wall.
Boom!
The blast wave didn't affect Lumian, who was deliberately hiding

in another corner. It only overturned the bottle of gray amber perfume in front of him and quaked the entire basement.
The gurgle of liquid flowed from the open bottle, its elegant and sweet fragrance intensifying instantly.
Lumian leaned against the wall, eyes closed, lost in Cogitation.
His mind conjured a crimson sun, holding it steady for a few seconds.
Suddenly, a terrifying sound reached Lumian's ears, as if from an infinite distance yet unnervingly close.
Blue veins bulged across his face, hands, and neck, quickly turning red.
Simultaneously, silver-black spots seeped from his skin.
He opened his mouth to scream, but collapsed and curled up before a sound could escape.
Fallen Mercury slipped from Lumian's left palm, but it dared not make a move. It didn't even attempt to approach his exposed face or right hand to create a marionette through contact.
It just quivered there, violently.
Outside the basement, the monster poised to conjure a fireball froze beside the entrance Lumian had excavated.
It couldn't help but shudder.
A few seconds later, it fled, abandoning the hunt.
Lumian plunged into a darkness teeming with flickering flames. His mind was overwhelmed with excruciating pain and malevolent thoughts.
In that moment, death seemed preferable. He sensed something deep within him rapidly growing and taking form.
It appeared to be a trauma—composed of all negative personalities and a particular will. Once assembled into human shape, it would utterly supplant the original him.
Amid the unending darkness of despair and pain, Lumian caught a whiff of a scent.
Elegant and sweet.
It was Aurore's fragrance, a familiar aroma.
Aurore... Grande Soeur... Lumian slowly regained his composure, as if hearing the comforting melody once more.
I want to live!
The loop hasn't ended yet!
...
A rush of thoughts flooded back to him. Lumian finally vanquished the pitch-black will and the agony-laced darkness within his heart and opened his eyes.
The first thing in his sight was the toppled bottle of gray amber perfume on the ground.

It toppled? Lumian's heart ached as he reached out his right hand.
Initially, he'd only intended to mimic Aurore's use of incense to control his symptoms and rely on the natural perfume as a wake-up call. Unexpectedly, more than half the bottle had spilled.
In the next instant, his body quivered. He saw the charred, bloodstained back of his hand and the silver-black circular spots that had yet to fade.
Without needing a reminder, Lumian could "smell" the unfamiliar, hair-raising scent on himself.
If he crossed paths with Valentine now, he'd be "purified" by his Holy Light Summoning without revealing a thing.
Lumian scooped up the remaining half of the gray amber perfume, tightened the cap, and stowed it away.
He then picked up Fallen Mercury, still trembling violently, and asked in Hermes, "Is the fate exchange over?"
Fallen Mercury swiftly shook left and right, signaling it wasn't.
Lumian exhaled in relief.
He feared that by the time he awoke, the fate exchange would've been completed—the shock would last no more than a minute.
If he couldn't locate the flaming monster in time, his recent torment would be futile.
Breathe in, breathe out... Lumian adjusted his dreadful condition and mustered his remaining strength before crawling out of the basement through the hole he had dug earlier.
Each motion tugged at various wounds, making him wince in pain.
Upon exiting the basement, Lumian searched for the flaming monster's tracks and sighed inwardly.
Using Cogitation in such a state and fully activating the thorn symbol on my chest is downright suicidal...
I haven't done it since becoming a Hunter, barely repressing the symptoms with gray amber's scent. Had I done it a few times before, my body might have mutated slightly, turning me into a monster...
I can't risk this for a while unless I have a death wish...
He opted for Cogitation to fully activate the black thorn symbol on his chest rather than the sacrificial dance's partial activation, as time was of the essence and he couldn't perform the dance.
With Cogitation, he could frighten off the flaming monster in five or six seconds. The enigmatic sacrificial dance, however, took 30 to 40 seconds—even with his familiarity.
In Lumian's hunting strategy, this was his last resort. If he couldn't evade the flaming monster's pursuit by other means, he'd attempt Cogitation!

Lumian hadn't anticipated that Cogitation would leave him gravely injured from the start and on the brink of losing control, turning into a monster.
Before long, Lumian discovered the flaming monster's tracks and pursued them.
A few minutes later, the prints appeared fresher, so he slowed his pace.
Soon after, Fallen Mercury shuddered on its own, notifying Lumian that the fate exchange was complete.
Without hesitation, Lumian brandished the iron-black axe and charged forward, following the flaming monster's footprints.
In under twenty seconds, he spotted the scorched and smoldering prey.
It cowered in a rock-encircled corner, quaking.
Lumian dashed over, cast aside Fallen Mercury, and seized the axe with both hands, cleaving down with all his might.
With a dull thud, the flaming monster's head and body separated.
Bright red blood spurted out violently, igniting into scarlet flame clusters on the ground.
Lumian, unable to hold on any longer, collapsed to the ground with his axe.

Chapter 97: Courage

Lumian slumped to the ground, gasping for breath. He could barely muster the strength to move a finger.

Silently, he observed the crimson flames flickering on the ground, their intensity gradually diminishing until they snuffed out.

During this time, Lumian managed to lean forward and grab the Fallen Mercury with his left hand, while his right hand tightly gripped the iron-black axe, ready for any unexpected threats.

His focus was unwavering, and he remained on high alert.

Inwardly, he prayed to the Eternal Blazing Sun and the unknown, great being, hoping They would shield him from harm.

In his current state, even a mundane foe like the skinless monster could easily take him down, let alone the possibility of the flaming creature reviving itself unexpectedly.

As time ticked by, Lumian's spirituality and stamina gradually improved, but his injuries only worsened, leaving him disoriented and unfocused.

Hunters need to be cautious, level-headed, and patient--capable of using their environment to their advantage. Above all, they require courage.

Courage to confront the unexpected, to persevere in the face of crisis, to steel oneself when escape seems impossible, and to find a path out of the jaws of death...

Distracted by these thoughts, Lumian suddenly felt as if the Hunter potion coursing through him had been fully absorbed.

It was as if a barrier had shattered, and a tiny spark had merged with every fiber of his being.

All traces of Lumian's loss of control vanished, and his condition immediately improved.

Slowly, he rose to his feet and heaved a quiet sigh.

I've actually digested it...

This meant he was ready for the next potion.

Lumian, clutching the pewter-black dirk in his bandaged left hand, scanned his surroundings. Occasionally, he fixated on the flaming monster's remains, patiently awaiting the appearance of the Beyonder characteristics.

Unlike the shotgun monster's swift transformation, Lumian waited for half an hour. He wondered if the flaming monster still lived and whether he should strike it a few more times.

Finally, on the verge of collapsing from his injuries, red sparks burst forth from the monster's body.

Like fireflies, they swarmed around the corpse before gradually coalescing into a scarlet object resembling a heart.

The "heart" pulsed, its surface pocked with countless tiny holes, from which indistinct flames seeped.
Is this the main ingredient for the Pyromaniac potion? Lumian mused, reaching down to pick it up.
A searing pain radiated from his palm straight to his mind, making him instinctively want to fling the "heart" away to escape the agony.
Luckily, Lumian's skin had been numbed by the flaming monster's burns, allowing him to barely tolerate the relatively minor pain.
He tried wrapping the "heart" in a strip of cloth, but it instantly incinerated the fabric, reducing it to ashes.
After a moment's thought, Lumian set the Beyonder ingredient on the ground, wrapped the Fallen Mercury in the remaining black cloth, and secured it at his waist.
Next, he emptied the contents of the cloth bag containing the lead bullets into his pocket.
He then filled the bag halfway with soil from the area before tossing in the flame-wreathed heart.
But Lumian didn't stop there. He continued shoveling soil into the bag until the "heart" was entirely encased in layers of inflammable earth.
Exhaling, he carried the bag to the edge of the ruins, pondering a newly discovered problem.
I'm only a Sequence 9, and this is the main ingredient for the corresponding Sequence 7 Pyromaniac. I can't just advance to Sequence 7, can I?
This will make me lose control!
I initially thought the flaming monster would yield a Pyromaniac, Provoker, and Hunter Beyonder characteristic, but it's all mixed together...
Uncertain of what to do, Lumian stumbled away.
Miraculously, he didn't encounter a single monster on his way back. In his weakened state, any confrontation would have spelled disaster. His only hope was to rely on his keen observation and sharp senses to detect danger early and avoid it.
After an indeterminate amount of time, Lumian exited the dream ruins and traversed the barren wilderness, arriving back at his semi-subterranean two-story dwelling.
Laboriously, he climbed to the second floor and removed the Fallen Mercury, the cloth bag with the Pyromaniac ingredient, and the iron-black axe. He placed them on the bedside table or tossed them to the floor before staggering to the full-length mirror embedded in the wardrobe.
In the mirror, Lumian saw his ghostly pale face, marred by flame

scars and faint silver-black patches on his skin.
His blue eyes flickered with an illusory silvery hue, entwined with darkness.
This was a sign that he had sustained severe injuries and nearly lost control.
If not for his home-field advantage in the dream ruins or the acquisition of Fallen Mercury and Invisibility, Lumian would have had no chance of defeating the flaming monster.
Munching on jerky and cheese to stave off the intense hunger left by his possession, he collapsed onto the bed.
He desperately needed to return to reality and rest for a while, allowing his body to recover swiftly.
...
Sunlight pierced through the curtains, casting the bedroom in a soft glow that highlighted Aurore's desk, cluttered with reference materials, reading notebooks, and stacks of manuscripts. It also illuminated a wardrobe filled with dresses and an exquisite full-body mirror.
Lumian opened his eyes to meet his sister's light-blue gaze.
Aurore watched him stir, her voice laced with concern. "How was it? Is everything alright?"
She knew that her brother had ventured into the dream ruins to hunt the flaming monster this time.
"I succeeded." Lumian sat up, his head feeling foggy. His skin tingled, and his bones threatened to snap.
But compared to the excruciating pain that had nearly killed him in the dream, this was nothing.
He lowered his gaze to examine his body. Red, swollen patches covered his skin, as if he were suffering from an allergic reaction.
"That's good..." Aurore sighed with relief. "An hour ago, you twitched all over and kicked me awake."
Lumian laughed, self-deprecating.
"It was indeed dangerous back then. I almost lost control."
"I was hesitant to wake you up, but you quickly calmed down and didn't scare me anymore," Aurore said, visibly relieved.
Lumian's heart stirred. "And you just kept looking at me?"
"That's right." Aurore nodded calmly. "If anything happens, I have to shake you awake and bring you back to reality. You can't die in your dreams."
Lumian suddenly felt the pain, struggle, and fear of nearly dying in his dream dissipate, replaced by a warm current surging from the depths of his heart.
He asked, almost without thinking, "You didn't wake up because I kicked you, did you? You haven't slept at all, have you?"

Aurore smiled and said, "That was my original plan, but considering how long you'd have to wait for that monster, and how I just finished my night duty, if I didn't catch up on sleep, I'd definitely be in a daze later. It'd be easy for me to make a mistake and not wake you up in time.
"So, I decided to put my hand on you and take the chance to catch some shut-eye.
"This way, I'd be able to sense any movement and wake up quickly. Heh heh, I was indeed kicked by you!"
As she spoke, she pointed at her right calf, where a visible bruise had formed.
Before Lumian could respond, she asked, "Tell me the details."
Suppressing his voice, Lumian recounted his ordeal, describing how he set up the trap, ambushed the monster, and how his clothes caught fire. Unable to turn invisible, he had no choice but to flee into the basement and fully activate the black thorn symbol with Cogitation.
Aurore listened intently, her expression occasionally betraying her worry for her brother's perilous situation. She was the kind of person who easily immersed herself in stories.
As the tale drew to a close, Lumian raised a question.
"How do I separate Provoker from the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic?"
He didn't know where to find the potion formula.
Aurore thought for a moment and said, "I don't know how to separate them. I've only heard that you might need the help of a high-level Beyonder for such a situation."
"A demigod?" Lumian guessed.
There were probably only three people he knew who had reached Sequence 4: the enigmatic lady, Madame Pualis, and the one lying in the coffin in the tomb.
Aurore nodded.
"I think so. Actually, you don't have to worry. I suspect the mysterious lady will come to you soon and provide some help. She always appears at critical points in your growth. This time should be no exception. After all, the loop hasn't been resolved and the secret of the dream ruins remains locked away."
"Go to Ol' Tavern to find her?" Lumian frowned.
Their agreement with Ryan and the others was to avoid going out as much as possible.
Aurore tersely acknowledged his words.
"Let's wait a while. She might visit us directly."
Aurore sighed and said, "For ordinary Beyonders, the potion formula isn't a problem, but you're different. There's corruption

sealed in your body, and you can lose control if there's the slightest issue. You still need a complete and correct Provoker potion formula."
"Why don't ordinary Beyonders need potion formulas?" Lumian asked, surprised.
Aurore explained, "It's not that they don't need them, but anyone below Sequence 7 can advance just by consuming the main ingredient."
"Doesn't that risk losing control?" Lumian asked, astonished.
Aurore acknowledged tersely.
"Years ago, there was a high chance of losing control. But recently, Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 Beyonder characteristics can indeed be consumed directly. However, it's about 20 to 30% more dangerous than concocting a potion.
"Right, that's the conclusion reached by our president, Gandalf."
Why? Just as Lumian was about to ask, a familiar song echoed from outside the house.
The siblings exchanged solemn glances.
Lent had begun, and the Spring Elf entourage had reached them.

Chapter 98: After the Celebration

A group of young men encircled Ava, singing and dancing as they arrived outside the Lumian residence.

Guillaume-junior of the Berry family strode to the door and slammed at it.

He was a friend of Lumian, Reimund, and Ava. With curly brown hair and prominent freckles, his blue eyes appeared smaller than average, as if perpetually narrowed.

With a creak, Aurore appeared before them.

Her blonde hair tied up, she wore a formal flounce-lined, light-collared dress. Aurore exuded energy, her face radiant—impossible to tell she hadn't slept well the night before.

Ava, donning a laurel crown woven from tree branches and flowers, stepped forward and sang,

"I'm the elf of spring,

"With a sweet face and a joyful ring,

"...

"Come and sing, come and dance,

"For this is the only way,

To obtain a harvest that will stay..."

Aurore listened quietly, took the leaf, and handed Ava a small pottery jar containing animal fat.

"Bumper harvest! Bumper harvest!" The young men cheered.

As the Spring Elf entourage set off for the next location, Guillaume-junior deliberately lagged behind and asked Aurore, "Where's Lumian? I haven't seen him in the past two days. Is he not participating in the Lent celebration?"

Aurore laughed and replied, "He's sick."

"Sick?" Guillaume-junior was slightly surprised. "He gets sick too?"

In his mind, Lumian was always brimming with energy. At most, he'd suffer minor injuries from a prank gone awry.

"I'll be worried if he never gets sick," Aurore replied jokingly. "All humans fall sick."

Guillaume-junior hurriedly waved at Aurore as the Spring Elf entourage moved further away.

"Tell Lumian I'll visit him after Lent!"

Aurore nodded slightly, watching Guillaume-junior sprint towards the entourage that had stopped in front of the next building.

"How was it?" Lumian stuck his head out beside his sister.

Aurore thought for a moment and said, "They're still normal, but I wonder what will happen at the end of the celebration."

Lumian recalled the bloody scene of Ava's beheading at the celebration's end and the strange mood that agitated the young

people. They had either gone mad sending off the Spring Elf or succumbed to mental and physical breakdown, collapsing to the ground. No one was spared.
Silently, he glanced at Ava singing in front of the neighbor's house and Guillaume-junior and company surrounding her. He slowly withdrew his gaze.
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine also arrived on the first floor and looked out through the window.
"We have to be very careful from now on," Ryan said in a deep voice after the Spring Elf entourage left the area.
Aurore nodded and said, "Yeah."
Before the celebration ended, they quickly prepared lunch and filled their stomachs.
Clang! Clang! Clang! The classic wall clock on the first floor chimed, signifying noon.
Lumian and the others, having tidied up the dining room, exchanged tense glances.
If the Lent celebration had gone smoothly, it would've ended by now.
And if the ritual to send the Spring Elf off was completed, who knew what Cordu would become?
In their semi-subterranean building, Lumian needed to raise his head slightly to see the situation outside the window.
The sky was a brilliant azure, filled with white clouds. The sun shone brightly, and there were no dark clouds, fog, or dim light as he had imagined.
Leah paced around the stove, the small silver bells on her veil and boots tinkling nonstop. It was neither intense nor soothing.
Seeing Aurore looking at her, she explained, "We're already in danger, and it's been an extended period of danger, but it's manageable at the moment."
Aurore acknowledged and didn't inquire further.
Ryan, on the other hand, sighed and said, "By the twelfth night, it would be great if it was always at this level."
Aurore blinked, embarrassed to tell this Dawn Paladin of the Machinery Hivemind not to jinx it.
Although Lumian's heart was heavy, he still smiled and replied to Ryan,
"There's a proverb in our Dariège region that says, 'Good and bad are all predestined.' Regardless of how worried we are, we can't change what happens next."
What he didn't say was: The only thing they could do was muster up the courage to face it.
In the intermittent conversation that followed, the five of them

were on guard against any abnormalities. However, be it the weather or the birds, everything was so normal that it only instilled greater fear in them.
After almost thirty minutes, they found themselves staring at the door simultaneously.
Footsteps drew near.
Soon after, Aurore's doorbell rang, the sound reverberating through the first floor.
Exchanging a glance with his sister, Lumian cautiously approached the door and peered through the peephole.
The man who had rung the doorbell was their neighbor, Louis Bedeau.
"What's going on?" Lumian cracked the door open, smiling.
Louis Bedeau had black hair and blue eyes. He was in his forties and had been injured while harvesting wheat in the fields when he was young. He had only three fingers on his left hand.
Clad in a grayish-blue blazer and dark pants, he said timidly, "I need to borrow your oven. It's Lent. We must bake some fresh bread for the kids."
As he spoke, he lifted the flour bag and nudged the bag of inferior coal beside him.
Lumian hesitated for a moment before turning to Aurore.
Aurore nodded, signaling him to let Louis Bedeau in.
She had already discussed it with Ryan and the others in hushed tones, intending to observe the changes in the villagers who had participated in the Lent celebration up close.
"Just baking bread? I thought you'd make some bacon for your kids." Lumian stepped aside and teased Louis Bedeau with a grin.
Louis Bedeau replied cautiously, "If we have a bumper harvest this year, there should be plenty of bacon."
His eyes brimmed with anticipation, as if he was certain of a bountiful harvest.
Once inside, Louis Bedeau greeted Aurore and headed to the oven, busying himself.
The more Lumian and his companions observed, the stranger they found him.
Louis Bedeau didn't even glance at Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, as if they were invisible!
It was like a person who had already turned into a monster trying their best to pretend to be normal. However, as long as they encountered something that exceeded their original memories, they would display obvious abnormalities or ignore it.
Lumian instantly thought of the deputy padre, Michel Garrigue.
Initially, he appeared fine, but recently, all that remained were his

daily activities of eating, sleeping, and urging others to pray. He ignored everything else!
Under the watchful eyes of the three foreigners, Louis Bedeau baked his bread mechanically, occasionally conversing with Lumian and Aurore.
It was very normal, yet very abnormal.
After Louis Bedeau left with the baked bread, Aurore looked at Ryan and the others, smiling wryly.
"Everyone who participated in the Lent celebration must have become like this."
"It's like being replaced by a monster bit by bit," Leah exclaimed sincerely.
She no longer forced a smile on her face.
Lumian had already regained his composure and posed a question. "How can we save someone like this if we want to?"
"The only thing I can think of is purification," Valentine replied with a sigh. "But if the abnormality is already closely integrated with humans, the final outcome might be purification together."
At that moment, two more villagers passed by the window.
One of them was a regular customer of Ol' Tavern and Pierre Guillaume, who had scrounged Ryan's absinthe in a previous cycle. He was happily chatting with his companion, seemingly discussing the excitement of the Lent celebration.
As they passed Lumian's door, they simultaneously turned their heads to look inside the house, their expressions eerily grim.
After an instant, they withdrew their gazes and resumed their conversation, smiles plastered on their faces.
If Lumian and his companions hadn't been watching the outside whenever someone passed by, they wouldn't have noticed the fleeting change in their expressions.
The louder the laughter outside, the more suffocated they felt.
Silence took over the conversation.
Eventually, the two villagers left, and Aurore sighed, saying, "This isn't just being replaced by monsters bit by bit. I suspect that the entire village is filled with monsters wearing human skin, except for us."
Is this the complete Lent celebration? Lumian couldn't help but mutter to himself.
Ryan sternly warned, "It's going to get tougher every day. Everyone, hang in there."
From noon to night, they kept vigil against mutated villagers attacking the house, but apart from the occasional passerby who gazed inside with a sullen or cold expression, nothing happened.
The situation weighed heavily on Aurore and the others.

Ryan surveyed the room and said gently, "There are still a few days until the twelfth night. Don't be so tense.
"After dinner, we'll split into two groups and take turns resting. We must maintain a good mental state."
With such an experienced Beyonder with a calm demeanor, both Aurore and Lumian felt more at ease.
At midnight, Aurore and Lumian woke Leah and the others, then retreated to their bedroom.
Lumian glanced at the door and lowered his voice.
"That mysterious woman hasn't appeared. Should I find an opportunity to go out tomorrow and take a look at Ol' Tavern?"
"Everyone in the village might be a monster now. It'll be very dangerous if you go out." Aurore disagreed.
She pondered for a moment and said, "Let's wait a little longer. If the mysterious woman doesn't appear tomorrow morning, I'll accompany you to Ol' Tavern in the afternoon."
Lumian hesitated for a moment before nodding.
He planned to discuss with his sister tomorrow morning if they should ask Ryan and the others for help. The five of them could act together.
...
In the bedroom filled with a faint gray fog, Lumian opened his eyes.
He sat up and checked his body, realizing that his severe injuries had completely healed.
Just as he was about to marvel at the fact, he suddenly heard the sound of a doorbell ringing.
Someone's ringing the doorbell? The thought instinctively flashed through Lumian's mind. He habitually prepared to go down to the first floor to see who was visiting.
He had just taken a step when his entire body froze.
This was the dream ruins!
How could anyone visit?

Chapter 99: Guest

Instantly, Lumian tensed up.

He spun around and returned to the bed, scooping up Fallen Mercury with his bandaged left hand.

Grabbing his shotgun, he strode to the bedroom window while the doorbell continued to ring. He scrutinized the entrance.

There was no one there!

In that moment, Lumian's heart felt like it was about to seize.

He intended to activate his Spirit Vision for a better look.

Since he would hear the maddening and terrifying sound and show signs of losing control after entering Cogitation for a few seconds in the dream ruins, he couldn't use this ability smoothly. It took him a while to complete the corresponding operation.

However, even with his Spirit Vision activated, he still didn't notice anyone at the door.

Yet, the doorbell rang incessantly.

As his thoughts raced, Lumian seriously considered returning to bed, forcing himself to sleep and escape the dream.

But he felt that even if he returned to reality, he might not be able to evade the subsequent attack, considering the unknown danger that could invade his semi-subterranean two-story building at any moment.

Two scenarios:

If the person ringing the doorbell can enter, going to bed is as good as surrendering.

If they can't enter, I'll be safe as long as I don't open the door myself.

Regardless, I must go downstairs and take a look...

Lumian made up his mind quickly.

He sheathed Fallen Mercury at his waist, clipped his axe, and hoisted his shotgun. He stepped out of the room and cautiously descended the stairs.

Upon reaching the first floor, a figure came into view.

At the six-person dining table sat the enigmatic woman Lumian had been searching for.

She wore a white blouse with a large bow at the collar and loose pearl-gray pants. Her casual attire was deceptively elegant.

She sipped a pale-golden drink, a short black hat beside her.

Lumian relaxed and approached the mysterious woman with brown hair and blue eyes.

He set the shotgun and axe aside, pulled out a chair opposite the dining table, and sat down. He asked, "You can enter here?"

The woman set her glass down and smiled.

"How else do you think those materials were delivered to your room?"
As she spoke, the jingling sound ceased.
Lumian glanced at the door, puzzled.
"Since you're already inside, why were you still ringing the doorbell?"
She smiled and replied, "That's basic courtesy."
Courtesy that can scare people to death? Lumian dared only to mutter inwardly.
He got straight to the point.
"I've obtained the Pyromaniac Beyonder ingredient. Uh, it should be Pyromaniac."
The woman nodded gently.
"I know. That's why I came to see you."
"Are you willing to help me separate the Provoker Beyonder characteristics and give me the corresponding potion formula?"
Lumian suppressed his sudden joy and asked, "I was planning on finding you at Ol' Tavern."
As for the price he would have to pay, he no longer cared.
The lady smiled and said, "With Cordu's current situation, it's very dangerous for you to go out, so I came here directly. I can indeed provide the help you want, but it won't be free this time."
Lumian noticed that indecipherable emotion in the woman's eyes again, but the notion that it was no longer free reassured him.
The unknown was even more terrifying.
"What is the price I need to pay?" he asked without hesitation.
She replied calmly, "The separated Pyromaniac and Hunter Beyonder characteristics belong to me."
That simple? Lumian was surprised.
He didn't even think of it as a price. After all, he wouldn't be able to use the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristics for a long time.
She continued, "In addition to the help I originally provided, if there's any more in the future—if there's a future for you—you have to do something for me."
Lumian sensed the inscrutable emotion in her eyes intensify.
He probed, "What if I don't?"
She laughed.
"Isn't it common for investments to fail? Didn't your sister lose some money buying stocks with divination?"
"What do you need me to do?" Lumian asked without hesitation.
She sighed softly.
"Let's talk about it if you can survive.
"Alright, give me the Beyonder characteristic you obtained."
Lumian rose and headed for the stairs leading to the second floor.

He barely restrained himself from sprinting up the staircase. When she could no longer see him, he dashed.
Soon, Lumian returned to the first floor with the cloth bag containing the Pyromaniac Beyonder characteristic and approached the dining table.
The woman raised her glass again and sipped the pale-gold liquid.
"What's this?" Lumian asked casually.
She explained simply, "It's an aperitif from Trier called Black Poca. It's brewed from ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves soaked in sweet wine for a long time. It tastes pretty good."
Having raised the topic merely to build rapport, Lumian didn't pry further. He opened the cloth bag and extracted the burning heart from the soil.
A scorching sensation seared his palm. Enduring the mild pain, he leaned forward and handed the Beyonder characteristic to the woman across the dining table.
She extended her left palm and let the "heart" hover in midair.
She glanced at Lumian and chuckled.
"When storing Beyonder characteristics in the future, remember to change their environment every once in a while. If such a thing comes into contact with something for too long, it's very likely to fuse with it and become a mystical item that needs to be sealed."
Is that so... Lumian asked, "How often do I need to make a change?"
"Normally, it takes two to three days," the woman said nonchalantly, "but accidents do happen. I recommend switching environments every 24 hours. With proper sealing and preservation, it could last months or even years. Also, if you've already mixed Beyonder ingredients into a potion, drink it as soon as possible. Otherwise, the liquid might merge with the bottle."
As she spoke, a sudden flash enveloped her body, and the burning "heart" transformed into countless red fireflies.
The fireflies danced and swirled, coalescing into three distinct objects.
One was a dark red, springy, textured object. Another was a shrunken version of the burning heart, now missing numerous holes. The last was a black stone with a liquid-like surface and a potent odor.
The woman's right palm caressed the three objects, causing two to vanish into thin air.
All that remained on the dining table was the dark "rock," about half the size of a fist.
"Is this the Provoker Beyonder characteristic?" Lumian asked eagerly.

The woman produced a post-it note and a silver fountain pen, scribbling down the potion formula, then reminded him, "You still lack mystical knowledge. After killing the monster, you only took the Beyonder characteristic.
"Such Beyonder creatures are rich in spirituality. Many of their parts can be used to make charms, lotions, and ingredients for certain spells and rituals. For example, its blood is a supplementary ingredient for the Pyromaniac potion.
"Although the Pyromaniac potion requires Fire Salamander blood, the monster's blood will do. It's essentially the same, and the effects might even be better."
The more Lumian listened, the more regretful he became.
Although Aurore's adventure novels included scenes of hunting monsters and harvesting parts, he hadn't connected this to reality. He believed the flaming monster's only value was its Beyonder characteristic.
And now, retrieving it was impossible—the blood would have dried by now!
The woman ignored his reaction, tearing off the top note and letting it float toward Lumian.
Lumian grabbed it and read the words eagerly.
"Provoker potion formula:
"Main ingredient: One Provoker Beyonder characteristic;
"Supplementary ingredients: 50 milliliters of distilled liquor, 10 drops of honeysuckle extract, 5 grams of grapevine powder, 10 grams of fern powder;
"Usage: Drink it directly."
After finishing, Lumian asked, puzzled, "There aren't any materials rich in spirituality..."
Like the Fire Salamander's blood.
She smiled and replied, "Different potions have different requirements. Yours mainly relies on symbolic mysticism.
"For example, ferns symbolize being 'easily influenced by others.' This aligns with the essence of a Provoker."
So, a Provoker needs to sway others with their words? Lumian tucked the note away, pondering where he might find the supplementary ingredients.
Distilled liquor was available at home; Aurore used it in certain dishes. Grapevines and ferns were abundant in Darìège, though venturing out might be risky. The only item left was honeysuckle—he'd have to ask Aurore if she had any among her spell-casting supplies...
When Lumian looked up again, the woman across from him, along with the black short hat and the Black Poca aperitif, had

disappeared.
He hadn't even noticed when she'd left.
This despite the fact that his Spirit Vision hadn't been deactivated the entire time.
Phew. Lumian exhaled and headed back to the bedroom, clutching the Provoker Beyonder characteristic and the potion formula, anticipation swelling within him.
He quickly lay down on the bed, intending to return to reality and consult Aurore, hoping to gather the additional ingredients by nightfall.
He didn't care that his Spirit Vision was still active; it would deactivate on its own once he fell asleep.
...
In the dead of night, Lumian opened his eyes and glanced over at Aurore.
He couldn't wait to share the news of acquiring the Provoker potion formula with his sister.
Yet, almost simultaneously, he spotted Aurore's mouth open slightly, a hazy, translucent figure emerging.
It was a bizarre, lizard-like creature!
Lumian's gaze locked in place. As the ethereal lizard surveyed its surroundings, he instinctively shut his eyes.
The "lizard" darted its gaze around before quickly scurrying away from Aurore's mouth and exiting the room.
Lumian reopened his eyes, staring at his sister in bewilderment.
Aurore's face was shrouded in darkness.
Her mouth hung slightly open as she slumbered peacefully.
Lumian observed her, motionless, as if he'd become a statue.
In the thick of night, his heart sank further into despair.

Chapter 100: Hesitation

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. The second hand of the wall clock echoed through the dark room.

After what felt like an eternity, Lumian finally shook off his nightmare.

He hastily reached over, gripping Aurore's shoulders and shaking her vigorously.

"Wake up! Wake up!"

He stifled his voice, careful not to alert the three official investigators on night duty.

Aurore's eyes remained tightly shut, her mouth slightly agape. No matter how much Lumian shook her, she didn't respond. She appeared like a living corpse, devoid of a soul.

Lumian's shaking gradually slowed, then ceased altogether.

He gazed at the sleeping Aurore, frozen in place for a long while.

He couldn't comprehend what was happening or when the issue had begun. The fear he felt mirrored the night he'd witnessed his grandfather's death.

From that day on, he'd embarked on his nomadic existence.

Lumian's fists clenched tighter, his body quivering slightly.

Abruptly, he spun around to face the window.

The translucent, ghostly "lizard" had returned to the room.

Lumian leaped off the bed, lunging with his right hand to grab the stunned creature as it caught sight of him awakening.

In the next instant, he jammed the "lizard" into his mouth, snarling with a twisted expression, "You like to worm your way into people's mouths, huh? Fine! I'll give you a chance!"

As he crammed the "lizard" into his mouth, he tore at it ferociously, his eyes bloodshot.

The "lizard" appeared too petrified to resist.

Just then, a voice sounded behind Lumian.

"What are you doing?"

It was Aurore's voice.

Lumian froze and slowly turned to look at the bed.

At some point, Aurore had woken up. Her blond hair disheveled, she sat up with her light-blue eyes filled with confusion and bewilderment.

Subconsciously, Lumian glanced down and realized that the "lizard" he had captured had long vanished.

For a moment, he didn't know if what he had just seen was a nightmare or reality.

"What's wrong?" Aurore frowned.

Lumian forced a smile.

"You kicked me off the bed while having a nightmare."
"Is that so?" Aurore eyed her brother suspiciously, feeling like he was playing a prank.
She thought for a moment and said, "I had a nightmare. I dreamt that I was grabbed by a huge monster and stuffed into its mouth. I was so frightened that I struggled with all my might and finally woke up."
As Lumian listened, a chill ran through his body, as if he had been submerged in an icy lake that hadn't completely thawed.
"Maybe, probably, I really kicked you..." Aurore was a little embarrassed.
Lumian closed his eyes and smiled.
"I'm just kidding. I woke up because of something else."
He then lowered his voice and said, "That mysterious lady appeared in the dream ruins and helped me separate the Provoker Beyonder characteristic and gave me the correct potion formula."
"So, you woke up in joy and wanted to ask me if I had the corresponding supplementary ingredients?" Aurore deduced.
Lumian said with a smile, "That's right. By the way, do you have honeysuckle extract, grapevine powder, and fern powder?"
His smile was much more natural than before, but there seemed to be a flickering glint in his eyes.
Aurore mulled it over for a moment before responding, "I have both grapevine and fern. One is a ritual ingredient, and the other is a spell medium.
"Honeysuckle flowers. We always have them at home. Don't you know that I soak them in water for drinking?"
As she spoke, she rummaged through the hidden pocket of her long dress.
"That's honeysuckle?" Lumian looked at his busy sister and deliberately smiled. "Why didn't you ask if I was given free help this time?"
Aurore took out a short grapevine and said with a smile, "You grind it into powder yourself!"
She didn't seem to hear Lumian's question.
"Alright." Lumian pretended not to have asked.
He then said to his sister, "The Provoker potion still requires distilled liquor. I'll head to the cellar to retrieve it and strive to advance to Sequence 8 tonight."
"It will take some time to make extracts from honeysuckle flowers," Aurore said with a frown. "However, the supplementary ingredients for Low-Sequence Beyonders potions aren't that strict. You can use the entire honeysuckle flower as a substitute. You can consume them as long as the Beyonder characteristics can

eventually dissolve."
She then looked at the open door and asked in a low voice, "Aren't you afraid that Ryan and the others will be suspicious if you go to get distilled liquor in the middle of the night?"
Seeing his sister's reaction, Lumian forced his smile from being too stiff.
"As a regular at Ol' Tavern, waking up in the middle of the night and suddenly wanting to drink is very normal.
"Although alcohol has many disadvantages, it can at least relax my mind to a certain extent."
What he meant was to use the excuse that the Lent celebration had ended and he was under too much stress. He had trouble sleeping and needed hard liquor to relax.
"Sure." Aurore agreed.
Lumian turned around and walked to the door, the smile on his face gradually disappearing.
He clenched his fists tightly from beginning to end.
After exiting the door and arriving at the corridor, Lumian saw Ryan standing diagonally opposite him in a brown tweed shirt and pale-yellow pants. Leah and Valentine were at opposite ends of the corridor.
"Not sleeping anymore?" Ryan raised the kerosene lamp and looked at Lumian.
Lumian grinned.
"I'm heading to the cellar to get some liquor. How about it? Do you want a sip to relax?"
"I don't need it." Ryan nodded. "You haven't experienced anything like this before. You're tense and under a lot of stress. It's understandable. Alcohol can indeed help."
As he spoke, he walked towards the staircase with the flickering kerosene lamp.
"I'll go with you. You shouldn't move alone at a time like this."
"Alright." Lumian didn't object.
As the two entered the stairs, Leah took the initiative to approach Aurore's bedroom and stand guard at the door.
One step, two steps... Lumian and Ryan descended to the shadowy first floor in silence.
As the faint light cast a glow over half the stove, Ryan asked casually, "Did something happen upstairs? I heard some commotion."
Lumian opened his mouth and said with difficulty, "Aurore, something's wrong with Aurore..."
His intention in suggesting they get alcohol from the cellar wasn't to advance tonight. The two-story building in the dream ruins also

had a cellar and the distilled liquor. His main goal was to avoid Aurore and communicate with Ryan and the others about what had just happened.
However, when the words reached his lips, he almost couldn't bring himself to say them. He felt that the unsaid words were even more choking than the strongest liquor.
Ryan's expression turned serious.
"What's the matter?"
Lumian took a few deep breaths before saying, "Aurore, like the deputy padre, had a lizard that looked like a mini-elf coming out of her mouth."
It was as if all his strength had been drained when he said this.
After seven to eight seconds, he recounted the entire incident. Instead of waking up willingly, he explained it as happening to wake up and seeing it.
Ryan listened quietly and didn't rush him. After he finished, he said gently, "You handled it well. We can't let her know that something's amiss. I'm worried that it will worsen the situation.
"Continue pretending that nothing happened. At dawn, I'll use the excuse that Cordu has been corrupted and that we need to undergo a purification every day to prevent ourselves from being affected. I'll get Valentine to try and exorcize the lizard."
"Alright," Lumian replied weakly.
He felt that the "lizard" had already fused deeply with his sister's soul. It wasn't that easy to exorcize and purify.
Ryan glanced at him and patted his shoulder gently.
"I can understand how you feel. If something similar happened to my family, I wouldn't be able to stay calm.
"But you have to remember that impatience can't solve anything.
"I know Valentine's purification might not be effective, but we have to give it a try to confirm that it won't work. Yes, that abnormality is most likely related to Cordu's loop. As long as we can finally break the loop, your sister should be able to recover."
That's right... This is equivalent to corruption. As long as I can remove all the corruption when the loop is lifted, Aurore will definitely be fine... Lumian's eyes gradually lit up as he regained his motivation.
Ryan was rather satisfied with his reaction and said gently, "I need to remind you that you have to adapt to your sister's changes in the next few days. It's very likely that she'll be like the deputy padre, gradually losing herself to instincts. She'll act differently, following her memories and strongest emotions without reacting to anything else."
Lumian fell silent for a moment before saying, "I'll adapt..."

His voice became softer and softer until it trailed off.
After getting the distilled liquor from the cellar, the two of them returned to the second floor as if nothing had happened.
Upon entering the bedroom, Lumian smiled again.
He shook the bottle in his hand at Aurore and whispered, "It worked."
Aurore smiled and pointed at the desk.
"The honeysuckle, grapevine, and fern are all there."
Lumian nodded and placed the bottle on the desk.
Then, he lay back on the bed and closed his eyes under the pretext of trying to fall asleep and advance in his dreams as soon as possible.
He couldn't fall asleep no matter what.
He couldn't figure out when his sister had been corrupted and had the lizard enter her body. During this period, the two of them had been together every second. Even if Aurore went to the washroom, Leah would accompany her, and vice versa. *How could there be a problem?*
If it happened during our sleeping hours, why didn't anything happen to me? Lumian tried his best to recall, hoping to find the source. It would help resolve the abnormality.
Suddenly, he remembered something.
In the previous, previous cycle, Padre Guillaume Bénet had remarked that the Church didn't want to kill all the adults here and harvest a ruin. He said that he had other means even if Aurore really wanted to deal with them.
At that time, he was still an ordinary person.
Lumian initially believed that he was relying on Shepherd Pierre Berry, but with the current situation, he had a guess—a crazy guess: Perhaps from the beginning, most people in the village had been parasitized by those strange lizard-like creatures, including Aurore!
As the twelfth night approached, the corresponding abnormality would become more and more obvious, and some people would show signs earlier.
The reason why he was spared was because he had the bluish-black symbol on him.
Recalling Aurore's lack of commitment in many matters in the second half of the previous, previous cycle, Lumian felt that his guess might be correct.
He couldn't help but grit his teeth.
At this moment, Ryan was patrolling the corridor with a kerosene lamp.
On the wall beside him, the shadow suddenly lengthened.

Almost at the same time, the small silver bells on Leah's veil and boots rang.
She felt her shoulders turn abnormally cold.

Chapter 101: Different Powers

The sound of tinkling bells sent a shiver down Leah's spine. Unable to pinpoint the danger, she instinctively used her Paper Figurine Substitutes.

Her body rapidly shrank and thinned, morphing into a carefully trimmed paper figurine.

The paper figure darkened, turning yellow and brittle as if it had aged a decade in an instant.

Silently, the withered yellow paper disintegrated into countless tiny fragments.

Leah reappeared at the top of the stairs, clutching the kerosene lamp. But in the next moment, she felt the chill on her shoulders.

Her thoughts raced as she raised her right hand and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Activating her Spirit Vision, she glanced at the room across from her and the glass window.

In the dim light of the kerosene lamp, the washroom's glass reflected Leah's upper body.

Transparent, ghostly infants perched on each of her shoulders!

Their faces were round and chubby, their skin a ghastly blue-white. Their expressions twisted in malevolence.

The spectral infants leaned down, pressing their mouths to Leah's neck as if feeding on her essence.

Rather than panic, Leah breathed a sigh of relief.

Identifying the source of the threat was far better than being in the dark!

Now she could assess the situation and make informed decisions.

Just like this!

Leah drew her exquisite silver revolver, aimed at the eerie infant on her left shoulder, and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

A golden bullet, wreathed in illusory flames, burst from the barrel.

The infant wailed as it was flung from Leah's shoulder, consumed by the golden fire.

Bang! Leah fired again, this time at the infant above her other shoulder.

The second ghostly child, ablaze with the same intense fire, cried out as it followed its companion down the corridor.

A woman's figure materialized. Her eyes were a piercing blue, her features delicate; her round face framed by disheveled black hair. She was the padre's mistress, Sybil Berry, sister to Shepherd Pierre Berry.

Her skin was coated in a sickly blue hue, and on both sides of her

neck, grotesque growths protruded.
The spectral infants returned to her, latching onto the corresponding growths to feed.
As they nursed, the golden flames that engulfed them gradually dissipated.
But Leah would not stand idly by. She aimed at Sybil Berry and pulled the trigger.
With a bang, the golden bullet traversed mere meters before striking Sybil squarely in the forehead.
For some reason, Sybil made no attempt to dodge. A bloody hole bore through her skull.
Within the wound, white and red mixed as illusory golden flames devoured them both.
Clang! Sybil fell lifeless to the floor. The ghostly infants, their pale faces contorted in anguish, vanished.
That's it? Leah couldn't believe it.
The silver bells on her veil and boots continued to tinkle, growing more intense by the second.
In the blink of an eye, Leah felt a cold, malevolent force growing within her.
Frantically, she glanced at the washroom and the glass window. Her skin had taken on a bluish hue at some point.
In the next instant, her body reverted to a paper figurine.
The paper figure crumpled into a ball, hitting the floor with a thud.
Leah reappeared in the bathroom, the icy sensation still growing inside her.
Almost simultaneously, a gentle voice whispered in her ear.
"I made a pact with a strange spirit world creature and gained one of its abilities.
"Whoever kills me, I can be reborn within their body and take control.
"You're very beautiful. I like it very much. The padre should like you very much too..."
Without hesitation, Leah bolted from the bathroom, silver revolver and kerosene lamp in hand.
She had to find Valentine.
Exorcism was one of the Sun domain's specialties. They were particularly effective against such threats!
...
Valentine found himself cornered near the balcony.
The area was choked by pitch-black, thorn-covered vines hanging from the ceiling. Blood-red, putrid-smelling flowers bloomed all around.
Valentine spread his arms, summoning golden flames from thin

air to incinerate the monstrous flora.
Just then, a figure materialized in midair.
He wore a white robe adorned with golden threads. His black hair was short, his blue eyes solemn, and his nose slightly hooked. He was Guillaume Bénet, the padre of Cordu.
No longer invisible, he floated in the air and gazed down at Valentine. In ancient Hermes, he bellowed,
"Valentine!"
Dark energy flickered within the padre's robes.
This was an ability Guillaume Bénet had obtained through a contract with a spirit world creature.
By invoking the target's true name, he could affect their Soul Body, causing disorientation.
The closer the language was to nature and the spirit world, and the better the understanding of the target, the stronger the effect.
If his Spirit Body was far superior to the target's, he could even extract their spirit, leaving them disoriented and defenseless.
Valentine's head spun as he heard the padre's shout. He suddenly felt dizzy and couldn't think straight.
However, he quickly regained control and shook off the disorientation.
Ever since entering Cordu, he had never revealed his full name. The padre's ability had limited effect on him.
Guillaume Bénet hadn't expected success either. Before Valentine could completely shake off the dizziness, the padre hurled a human bone he had prepared earlier.
As the bone hit the ground, the airborne padre rapidly recited in Hermes, "Blind, deaf, unwakeable."
It was a curse and an ability Guillaume Bénet had gained through a contract.
He cast bones symbolizing death to render the target like the dead —blind and deaf, with unresponsive eyes.
Valentine wasn't asleep, so the curse couldn't render him unconscious. However, the lingering dizziness intensified, blurring his vision and causing his ears to ring. He struggled to see beyond three meters or hear anything further away.
Seizing the opportunity, the padre extended his right palm.
His blue eyes took on a hazy, almost ethereal quality.
Complex mercury symbols, reminiscent of tiny rivers, swirled around Valentine. They formed a grand illusory river shimmering with light.
Countless tributaries branched off downstream. As the main river surged forward, most were swallowed up, leaving only one.
Guillaume Bénet observed for a few seconds and snatched one of

the mercury symbols just before Valentine broke free from the cursed blindness and deafness.
He intended to amplify the corresponding tributary and make Valentine's fate of being paralyzed by the Abyssal Demon Flowers a reality.
...
Ryan barely managed to dodge the shadow's axe as it slashed down towards him. He quickly discarded the kerosene lamp he had been carrying and donned his silver-white armor. In his hand, a broadsword condensed from light appeared.
Clang! Clang! Clang!
Ryan slashed continuously, forcing the shadow back against the wall. The specks of Sunrise Gleam he released covered the surroundings, exorcizing the shadows in the area.
The pitch-black, pale-white, evil, or terrifying arms that were about to reach out from behind the shadow were pushed away, making it hard for them to grab Ryan's body.
With a clang, the shadow shrank back into the wall and reverted to normal.
It disappeared under the illumination of Sunrise Gleam.
Not far away, a remnant shadow enlarged, and Shepherd Pierre Berry, dressed in a long hooded coat, walked out.
He bent down slightly and charged at Ryan with his axe, accumulating powers in his body with every step. After a few steps, Pierre Berry seemed to have the posture and strength of a giant.
Ryan loomed over his opponent, gripping the Sword of Dawn with both hands as he prepared to strike the enemy charging at him like a rampaging bull.
Clang!
The broadsword and axe clashed, sending a shower of sparks in every direction.
Both Pierre Berry and Ryan recoiled simultaneously. One stumbled back three steps to regain balance, while the other only needed one.
Ryan halted his retreat, one leg stretched back, and seized the moment before Pierre Berry could steady himself. He lunged forward, slashing at his adversary.
Just then, Pierre Berry's mouth gaped open.
His tongue bizarrely morphed into a peculiar chameleon.
The chameleon's head was tucked between its legs, a front foot stuffed into its mouth.
The instant Ryan's gaze fell upon the chameleon, he was wracked by a searing pain in his head, so intense that his attack faltered,

failing to land.
Headache curse!
Shepherd Pierre Berry had gained this ability through a pact with an enigmatic Spirit Body that had reveled in studying all manner of curses during its life.
Capitalizing on the opportunity to inflict a debilitating headache on Ryan, Pierre Berry summoned the receding shadow back and unleashed a ferocious assault.
Amid the cacophony of clanging metal, Ryan found himself forced to retreat.
...
Amid the chaos outside, Lumian bolted upright and urgently told Aurore, "Something's not right! We have to regroup with Ryan and the others!"
Ryan had drilled this principle into their heads time and time again: In the face of an attack, they had to strive to stay together. A united team was far more effective than five individuals battling solo!
"Okay!" Aurore leaped out of bed and sprinted for the door, reaching into the concealed pocket of her flowing gown.
As Lumian neared the open doorway, he caught sight of a figure—Deputy Padre Michel Garrigue stood before him, garbed in a white robe adorned with gold thread.
The striking, curly-haired youth's eyes were eerily vacant as he offered Lumian a smile.
"Do you want to pray?"
With a swift motion, Lumian yanked his axe free and aimed for Michel's neck.
Michel's head lolled, but only a trickle of blood escaped.
Glancing at Lumian from the corner of his eye, he inquired with a radiant smile, as if nothing had transpired, "Do you want to pray?"
As Lumian prepared to raise his axe and sever the man's neck, an overwhelming sense of danger washed over him.
Relying on his Dancer's uncanny agility, he abruptly spun around and swung the axe behind his back.
In the next second, his gaze froze.
He saw Aurore.
Aurore's light-blue eyes had inexplicably grown vacant. She hurled a handful of powder, ground from some kind of tree, at Lumian.
Gazing upon his sister's familiar visage, Lumian's axe strike decelerated until it came to a halt.
He even forgot to evade.
A crackling noise erupted as a sphere of silver lightning struck Lumian's head.

He fainted.
Darkness swallowed his vision.

Chapter 102: Transfer

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ryan retreated, barely managing to parry Shepherd Pierre Berry's relentless onslaught.

Pierre Berry's eyes were bloodshot, the gentleness gone, replaced by a ferocious rage.

As sinister arms, either pitch-black or ghostly white, reached from the shadows to ensnare Ryan, Pierre Berry swung his axe at Ryan's head.

This time, Ryan didn't parry or retreat. He didn't even raise the Sword of Dawn.

Instead, he twisted his body, allowing the eerie arms to grasp his legs and Pierre Berry's axe to strike his shoulder.

Clang!

Spiderweb-like cracks spread across the silver pauldron, light flaking off and dissipating.

Grimacing in pain, Ryan genuflected, plunging the Sword of Dawn into the floor.

He knew he'd been separated from his allies for too long. He needed to regroup at any cost.

The strength of a team surpassed that of any individual!

In a split second, the light-infused two-handed broadsword detonated.

It shattered into countless light fragments, morphing into a hurricane that barreled towards Pierre Berry.

Panic flickered in Pierre Berry's eyes at the devastating blow.

Ignoring the malevolent arms, he retreated into his own shadow.

A fierce storm of pure light engulfed the area, slicing shadows and evil into shreds.

As an area-of-effect attack, Hurricane of Light inevitably impacted Ryan's surroundings, despite his best efforts to direct it towards his enemy.

Silently, the walls of Lumian's and Aurore's bedrooms crumbled, reduced to tiny fragments in the terrifying storm.

Near the balcony, pitch-black vines hanging from the roof writhed like tortured weeds. Even Padre Guillaume Bénet, suspended in midair, had no choice but to hastily dodge.

Bloodied scratches marred his body as he fled Aurore's house.

Rumble!

Half the roof had been obliterated, the second floor pockmarked with gaping holes. In many places, the stove below was visible.

Leah was also caught in the storm of light, her figure rapidly withering and shrinking, transforming into a paper figurine.

When the tempest subsided, she reappeared in the study, barely intact.
Ryan knew she had Paper Figurine Substitutes, allowing him to unleash such a brutal attack on Pierre Berry in a confined space.
As for Aurore, Lumian, and Valentine, their positions offered some protection from the attack. Ryan had tried to control the storm's direction, with limited success.
After assessing the situation, he decided to use this decisive attack.
Crimson moonlight and faint starlight streamed through the ruined roof. Ryan scanned the area but saw no sign of Aurore or Lumian. Leah, pale-faced, was rushing towards him. Valentine lay unconscious on the balcony, numerous wounds from the Hurricane of Light, but none lethal.
Seeing his battered allies, Ryan stopped searching. He grabbed Leah's shoulder and leaped to the balcony.
With one hand, the Warrior hoisted Valentine and jumped from the Lumian residence.
Relying on his not-yet-shattered Dawn Armor to withstand further ambushes, he raced towards the edge of Cordu Village, fleeing to the nearest mountain pasture.
They had a plan: if they couldn't defend Aurore and Lumian's homes, they'd retreat to the pasture.
There, they could use the terrain to their advantage, escape by leaping off the cliff, and trigger the cycle.
Padre Guillaume Bénet hovered above, unable to match the Dawn Paladin's top speed.
Beneath him, Shepherd Pierre Berry emerged from the shadows at the edge of the house.
His dark robe was shredded, the hood long gone. His face, chest, and legs bore deep gashes, blood oozing relentlessly. It was a chilling sight.
Had he not swapped his shadow with that of a villager at the crucial moment, he'd be dead with his body torn to shreds!
The villager who had served as his pawn was now undoubtedly a mangled heap of flesh and blood.
...
As Ryan obliterated the Abyss Demon Flower with his Hurricane of Light, Valentine's paralysis waned. He regained consciousness before they left Cordu Village.
"What's the situation?" he inquired, his voice muffled by the wind.
Ryan, running at full speed, couldn't elaborate. He replied tersely, "Help Leah first!"
Valentine glanced at Leah, cradled in Ryan's other arm, and noticed her pallid, ashen face.

Without a moment's hesitation, he stretched out his hand with great effort and placed his palm on Leah's shoulder.
"Sun!"
He cried out in ancient Hermes.
Glistening golden droplets materialized out of nowhere, raining down on Leah.
Her expression contorted, and steam rose from her body.
Within seconds, Sybil's ethereal figure was expelled, her face filled with shock and terror.
She couldn't fathom how she'd been ejected from Leah's body.
Immediately after, ghostly golden flames erupted from the void, engulfing the bizarre spirit like a candle, reducing it to liquid droplets.
Sybil shrieked and cursed, but couldn't evade her fate of being purified.
This time, she failed to reincarnate in Valentine's body.
"Vile creature!" Valentine muttered under his breath.
...
Shepherd Pierre Berry looked up at Guillaume Bénet, who hovered above, and asked, "Should we chase them?"
Despite his injuries, he refused to surrender.
Guillaume Bénet pondered for a moment and responded, "No need. Our priority lies here.
"They won't make any moves in the short term. They'll only observe and assess the situation. That's enough for us."
As he finished speaking, he furrowed his brow and whispered, "Sybil's dead."
"Can't she be 'reborn'?" Pierre Berry asked, surprised.
He wasn't particularly distraught over his sister's demise.
Guillaume Bénet couldn't help but curse, "I warned her not to use Rebirth in front of the three official Beyonders. Rebirth at this level is inherently countered by the power of the Sun pathway, but she didn't listen.
"Imbecile! What a waste of the Lord's gift!"
...
Lumian's eyes snapped open, taking in the wispy gray fog and the familiar ceiling above.
He had awoken within the dream ruins after losing consciousness.
Gasping for breath, Lumian struggled to sit up straight.
As Aurore's attack struck him, he had been filled with despair, thinking it was better to just surrender.
She could reclaim the beautiful life she had granted him, along with the five years she had given him.
Phew... Lumian exhaled sharply as two realizations pierced his

thoughts.
That wasn't Aurore. She was possessed by a monster!
To give up now would be to abandon her to the creature and snuff out her last hope!
Lumian rose to his feet, his resolve steeling within him.
He glanced toward the window and spotted a bottle of liquor, a honeysuckle flower, some grapevines, and fern powder.
Had that woman sent these materials? Had she witnessed the attack? Why hadn't she... Lumian shook his head, dispelling his intrusive thoughts.
In this dire circumstance, he could only rely on himself and his allies. No matter how powerful others may be, they were useless to him now!
Wasting no more time, Lumian retrieved the instruments he'd used to brew the Hunter potion and poured 50 milliliters of liquor into a beer mug.
He added the honeysuckle flower, grapevine powder, and fern powder, one after the other. Lastly, the repulsive "stone" with its dark, flowing liquid surface.
A sizzling sound accompanied the dissolution of the Provoker Beyonder characteristic, and the honeysuckle flower vanished.
The colorless liquor in the mug turned a deep black, becoming viscous. The mere sight of the potion made Lumian want to hurl it away and stomp it into oblivion.
He steadied himself, using shallow Cogitation to calm his nerves and focus.
Moments later, Lumian snatched up the beer mug without hesitation, gulping down the foul, pungent Provoker potion.
Setting the mug down, he immediately felt his insides grow heavy, as if plummeting.
Drawing on his experience, Lumian sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, bracing for the next transformation.
His breaths became heated, his emotions veering wildly between anger, sorrow, frustration, and exhilaration.
Simultaneously, a voice—infinitely distant yet intimately close—assailed his ears, drilling into his temples like an iron spike.
Familiar, searing pain engulfed Lumian's mind, but he couldn't shake certain thoughts.
I must succeed!
I must unlock the secret of the dream!
I must save Aurore!
I must shatter the loop in Cordu!
Enduring the scorching, tearing sensation and the illusion of losing control, Lumian didn't open his eyes or alter his posture.

He felt like a tiny vessel in a tempest, battered by waves and gales. Powerless, but not yet submerged.

After what felt like an eternity, the pain began to ebb as the bloodthirsty, insane thoughts receded from Lumian's consciousness.

He opened his eyes, knowing he had ascended to a Sequence 8 Provoker.

Chapter 103: The Padre's Plan

A dense white fog hung heavy in the sky, swallowing most of the light and casting the dream ruins into a perpetual twilight.

Lumian stood, stretching his limbs and surveying the blood-streaked mountain peak as he assessed his condition.

In comparison to Hunter, the Provoker's strength, reflexes, speed, and agility had improved, albeit modestly.

Lumian identified three primary changes:

First, his body had grown more robust and his recuperative abilities had seemingly improved.

Second, his spirituality had increased to a certain extent. He could now maintain his possession state for four minutes, up from just three.

Lastly, he had gained a Beyonder power called Provocation.

This ability induced a permanent state change while also requiring active activation to achieve its desired effect.

Lumian's observation skills had experienced a qualitative transformation, far surpassing those of an ordinary person. He could now effectively discern which words, actions, and situations would most easily trigger his target's sensitivities and provoke agitation.

When Provocation was employed, it merged insults and humiliation, causing the target to lose their composure.

The more tailored the taunts and humiliation, the more effective the Provocation. However, even a single word like "dogshit" could still incite anger to some degree.

Against an uncommunicative opponent, Provocation allowed Lumian to exude a repugnant aura.

This ability was well-suited to the traps and ambushes Hunters excelled in, but it held little meaning for Lumian in his present state.

He no longer had time for hunting. His sole focus was exploring the "wall" surrounding the blood-stained "peak" and uncovering the secret of the dream ruins.

In contrast, the enhancements to his spirituality and physical resilience pleased him. At the very least, he could now delve further into the dark area that once lulled him to sleep.

With the potion's boost, Lumian massaged his temples.

This time, activating his Spirit Vision was seamless.

He finally had the capacity to easily invoke his Spirit Vision.

Without hesitation, Lumian changed his clothes and gathered his gear: Fallen Mercury, the iron-black axe, a cloth bag of cheese and biscuits. He slung his shotgun over his back and exited the two-

story semi-subterranean building. Amidst the muted gray fog, he traversed the wilderness and entered the ruins.
He followed a familiar path, avoiding areas where monsters might lurk, and proceeded cautiously.
Upon reaching the area where he had encountered the three-faced monster, Lumian danced, partially triggering the black thorn symbol.
With the "amulet," he navigated increasingly treacherous terrain and repelled several horrifying creatures.
At last, he arrived at the thorny "wall" formed by an array of houses.
After a moment's consideration, Lumian chose a direction.
He resolved to enter the area that seemed to be shrouded in night, a place that instantly plunged him into a drowsy haze.
His intuition suggested that something significant lay beyond the towering wall of twisted trees. However, the area resembling the onset of night held a greater likelihood of harboring the secret of the dream ruins.
After all, "night," "slumber," and "dream" were often related terms.
In due course, Lumian, having performed another ritual dance, found himself in a place noticeably dimmer than its surroundings.
He exhaled slowly and stepped forward with determination.
Almost immediately, Lumian felt as though he had transitioned from a foggy day to a cloudy evening. Shadows enveloped the objects around him.
Clutching Fallen Mercury, he yawned and pressed on.
I can't sleep. I can't sleep! Lumian urged himself forward.
As he proceeded, Lumian remained vigilant, scrutinizing the buildings that formed the city wall. Yet, the secrets of the dream ruins eluded him.
Gold coins and other trinkets held no interest for him.
Delving deeper, he trudged dozens of meters, his willpower alone keeping his eyes open against the overwhelming drowsiness that engulfed his mind.
After a moment's contemplation, he opted for retreat. He would investigate the area behind the wooden wall and enter this sleep-inducing zone from another angle.
Perhaps that would grant him access to previously unreachable locations.
Lumian pivoted and retraced his steps, but the drowsiness persisted, growing in intensity with each passing moment.
At last, his resolve crumbled. His eyes slid shut, and he slumped to the ground.
Darkness consumed his vision once more.

...
Lumian was suddenly gripped by a sharp pain in his abdomen, causing him to curl up and open his eyes.
First, he saw a dazzling mural with a curved dome, followed by the stern visage of the padre along with his slightly hooked nose, and Pons Bénet's right fist, which he withdrew with a sinister grin.
I've been captured and brought to the cathedral? Lumian recognized the scene overhead and instinctively scanned his surroundings.
He saw Reimund's father, Pierre Greg, Ava's father, Guillaume Lizier, his neighbor Louis Bedeau, and nearly all the villagers.
The altar had transformed beyond recognition, now adorned with lilacs, tulips, and other symbols of that hidden entity instead of sunflowers.
The Sun Sacred Emblem had vanished, replaced by an unnaturally twisted thorn ring, seemingly oozing black liquid.
Spotting the familiar symbol, Lumian felt a wave of dizziness as heat surged in his chest.
He knew this was a sign that the corruption within him had been stirred but remained trapped within the bluish-black symbol.
The padre and his followers have turned the cathedral into an altar for the hidden entity? Poor St. Sith... Lumian imagined Valentine would go berserk upon seeing this.
Bound tightly, he surveyed his surroundings, relieved to find the stained glass and murals depicting the great Eternal Blazing Sun and St. Sith's preaching unscathed.
It seems the alterations were hastily made... Lumian deduced the cathedral's current state.
The villagers stood eerily silent, like wax figures.
After observing Lumian for a moment, the padre scolded Pons Bénet.
"How could you let him sleep? You should have woken him up as soon as you brought him back to the cathedral!"
"Understood," Pons Bénet replied, his gaze unusually deferential, as if the padre were his deity or ruler.
Leaning against a pillar, Lumian glanced up at Guillaume Bénet. "Where's Aurore?"
The padre smiled cryptically. "You'll find out soon enough."
"What about the three foreigners?" Lumian frantically devised an escape plan while trying to maintain the conversation.
Guillaume Bénet gazed through the stained glass, his expression relaxed. "They've escaped. They should be at the nearest alpine pasture by now. But don't expect them to rescue you and Aurore tonight. Knowing the officials, they'll stall and merely observe.

They'll only act after confirming the situation. Sometimes, they'd rather do nothing than make a mistake. That's how they wasted a decade of mine."
Lumian conceded the padre's point, but he knew that wasn't why Ryan and the others were waiting.
Without understanding why the evil god's followers had captured him and Aurore, Ryan's group wouldn't take drastic measures, like triggering the loop's reboot by leaving Cordu. They wanted to wait until the twelfth night to uncover the cause of the disturbance here, laying a solid foundation for escaping the predicament in the future.
Lumian's silence caused the padre's grin to widen.
In a matter-of-fact tone, he announced, "I plan to complete the ritual tonight."
What? Lumian was baffled.
In high spirits, Guillaume Bénet patiently elaborated, "I intend to move the April 9th ritual to tonight. The three foreigners won't have a chance to interfere."
What? The twelfth night can be moved up? Lumian was shocked, speechless, and inexplicably terrified.
At that moment, Guillaume Bénet turned to Pons Bénet and instructed, "Before taking him to the altar, ensure he stays awake. You may use any method, just don't kill him."
Pons Bénet asked eagerly, "What if I kill him?"
"We'll die together!" The padre glared at his dim-witted brother.
Send me to the altar and start the ritual again? *Could the bluish-black symbol on me be useful again?* Lumian's nerves steadied as he listened to the Bénet brothers' conversation.
The padre redirected his gaze to Lumian and leaned down. "Don't worry, you're not the vessel. We have a better choice."
A better choice? Lumian's alarm grew as he followed the padre's gaze to the original altar.
Aurore had appeared there at some point in time, dressed in a plain white robe, her golden hair unadorned and her light-blue eyes vacant.
"Aurore!" Lumian cried out.
Aurore remained statue-like, unresponsive.
The padre smiled and nodded.
"Yes, your sister is the superior vessel. Your role in the ritual is to help us expedite the timeline. We needn't wait for that exact moment or the shift in the constellations."
Lumian was terrified and bewildered.
Why can I help bring forward the twelfth night's ritual?
The padre leaned in once more, a smile of anticipation on his face.

"Because most of the boons we'd prayed for are within you."
What? *How does he know?* Lumian's eyes widened, straining to scrutinize Guillaume Bénet's face more closely.
Guillaume Bénet leaned in and whispered into Lumian's ear, "Did you really think you and Pualis were the only ones able to retain memories in the loop?"

Chapter 104: Resolute Decision

Upon seeing Lumian's blatant shock, Guillaume Bénet straightened up with satisfaction and said to Pons Bénet, "Keep an eye on him!"

With that, the padre strode towards the altar.

As he left, the villagers around them seemed to come alive, engaging in animated conversations.

"The horoscope is about to change."

"Our good fortune is coming!"

"It won't be long before we're wealthy!"

"When the time comes, I'll drink a bottle of wine every day and eat a pound of meat every meal!"

"I want to find a beautiful woman."

"I'm going to watch a play."

"..."

Lumian's mind was a whirlwind, and he barely noticed when Guillaume Bénet departed.

The padre's words were like a boulder tossed into a placid lake, sending ripples through Lumian's thoughts.

How is that possible?

In the previous cycle, I killed him because he didn't understand what made me special!

Back then, I didn't even know what was so special about myself. It was natural for him not to know... After that battle, he didn't have any conflicts with me in the subsequent cycles until Aurore began acting strangely...

But he didn't seem to know about the loop at all. The cursing he did when I led the rest to catch him in the adulterous act, him being knocked out by Leah after we infiltrated the cathedral, and being spied upon by Aurore using White Paper didn't seem fake at all!

If he was putting on an act, his level of restraint would be bone-chilling...

Moreover, he knows that Madame Pualis retains her memories in the loop and might know something about the abnormalities in the castle. Yet he still had an affair with Madame Pualis at the beginning of each loop, allowing no one to suspect him.

If it were me, I wouldn't even have desires after finding out what Madame Pualis had done, let alone sleep with her!

The more Lumian pondered, the more he found the padre terrifying. This fear was unlike the terror he felt from Madame Pualis.

Questions swarmed his mind:

Why didn't the padre with his memories sacrifice the three sheep

from the beginning and obtain the corresponding boon to take full control of Cordu? Why didn't he complete the twelfth night ritual on the first day?
This could have prevented any accidents!
What was he waiting for? The sacrificial ritual only takes place near Lent every time...
Does that ritual have a date and time requirement?
The Lent celebration is an integral part of the twelfth night's ritual.
So, the padre will only have a chance to advance the subsequent ritual after Lent is over?
But he could just control everyone from the beginning and wait for Lent to arrive...
Also, didn't the hidden existence find it odd that they prayed for a boon twice across three cycles? Yes, He might have done something, like helping the padre recover his memories!
No, if their sacrificial ritual had truly been completed, the three sheep wouldn't have entered the loop again. Their spirits and Beyonder characteristics should have gone to the hidden existence.
Could it be that, like Reimund, the spirits gathered around the altar and didn't escape the loop?
Who were the padre and the others praying to, and who bestowed their power...
As Lumian considered this, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his lower body.
He instinctively curled up, but the ropes binding him prevented the motion.
Pons Bénet pulled his foot back from between Lumian's legs, smirking as beads of cold sweat formed on the young man's forehead. Lumian couldn't even make a sound.
He squatted down, raised his right hand, and slapped Lumian.
"Did you enjoy zat? Tell me, did you enjoy it?"
Without waiting for Lumian's response, he swung his arm and slapped the right side of his face, causing his ears to ring. Lumian felt like his head might fly off.
Seeing Lumian being beaten by Pons Bénet, Reimund's father, Pierre Greg, approached and squatted down. He sighed and said, "Bear with it. Just endure it for a while. Our fortunes are about to change. Good luck is on its way. If you leave now, you'll miss the opportunity!"
Ignoring Lumian's reaction, he repeated the same words, trying to persuade and console him.
Lumian paid no attention to Pierre Greg. He gazed at Pons Bénet without anger, as if he were looking at empty air.
He completely disregarded him, ignoring the pain and humiliation

this villain had inflicted upon him.
Only one thought occupied his mind:
The situation is dire!
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine are unlikely to trigger the loop and restart everything prematurely before confirming the padre's intentions. Besides, they just fought; who knows when they'll recover. They probably won't sneak back to the village until tomorrow or the day after.
This way, no one can stop the padre from conducting the ritual in advance tonight...
Slap, slap, slap. Pons Bénet continued slapping Lumian's face and kicking his lower body, intensifying the pain he endured.
Lumian's thoughts were repeatedly interrupted by pain as he stubbornly tried to focus, refusing to waste even a second on Pons Bénet.
This only infuriated Pons Bénet further, causing him to strike even harder.
My specialness has already been discovered and targeted. They won't give me a chance to disrupt the ritual...
What should I do...
What can I do?
Lumian endured the pain and searched for a way to escape his current predicament.
Pons grew tired from beating him up. He stopped and panted.
"If ze padre hadn't forbidden me from killing you, I would've sliced off your flesh piece by piece, including what's down below!"
Hearing this, Lumian was taken aback as an idea flashed through his mind.
Kill me?
Kill me!
He suddenly raised his head and glared at Pons Bénet, his face contorted into a twisted smile born of pain.
"Is that all you've got? Are you using that pathetic little knife of yours to pick lice for me?"
He fully embraced his role as a Sequence 8 Provoker.
...
In the alpine meadow nearest to Cordu.
Ryan, clad in tattered armor, stood guard at the entrance and asked Valentine and Leah, "How do you feel?"
"I'm fine," Valentine responded immediately.
Leah added, "My spirituality has almost recovered."
Ryan nodded and dissolved the Dawn Armor.
"After I rest and recover a bit, we'll return to Cordu."
"Now?" Leah sounded surprised.

They hadn't been gone from Cordu for long.
Ryan exhaled slowly and said, "We need to find out as soon as possible why Guillaume Bénet's group attacked us tonight and not on the twelfth night. Besides, they captured Lumian and Aurore, but they didn't pursue us. Experience tell me that something's off."
Leah nodded slowly. "But we're not in the best shape."
After all, they had just fought a massive battle.
"That's why Guillaume Bénet doesn't expect us to return to Cordu tonight," Ryan explained. "Also, we left that item at Lumian and Aurore's house. We have to retrieve it as soon as possible. We can't let Guillaume Bénet and the others get their hands on it."
Valentine and Leah's expressions turned grave at the mention of that item.
They agreed to Ryan's plan.
...
Pa!
Pons Bénet slapped Lumian's face again, making his nose throb. Two streams of bright red blood flowed down to his mouth, bringing with them a foul and salty taste.
"How about zis?" Pons Bénet asked with a smile.
Lumian studied his expression and actions, realizing that his words hadn't had the desired effect.
He sniffed his blood-filled nose and replied with a smile, "Any other woman could hurt me more than you!"
"Is zat so?" Pons Bénet's expression darkened.
With a slap, he struck Lumian's mouth, sending two of his teeth flying with blood.
Relying on Provoker's insight and his experience at pranking, Lumian acutely sensed that Pons Bénet's reaction was different this time.
Familiar with all sorts of scandals and rumors in Cordu, Lumian vaguely thought of something and grinned.
"You don't seem to have a mistress."
His mouth was swollen from the slap, and two of his teeth were missing. His words came out slightly muffled.
Hearing the word "mistress," Pons Bénet's expression shifted subtly as he kicked Lumian's groin.
Lumian nearly blacked out from the pain. He couldn't speak for a few seconds.
Forcing a smile, he said with a boisterous laugh, "And the padre's mistresses are all over the village. Can't get it up?"
Pons Bénet's expression instantly darkened.
Lumian knew he had guessed right.
He endured the pain, his eyes narrowing.

He hadn't dared use Provocation earlier, fearing that he would be discovered if he used it too often. Now was the time!
Lumian laughed out loud.
"Did the padre sleep with your wife too? Are all your children his?"
Pons Bénet's eyes turned bloodshot.
He suddenly reached out and grabbed Lumian's neck, yelling with all his might, "Why don't you just die!"
Lumian heard a cracking sound from his neck and found it difficult to breathe.
Yet, he wasn't afraid. Instead, the corners of his mouth curled up as he calmly awaited the excruciating pain and inevitable death.
He had done his best to enrage Pons Bénet so that he would kill him.
Once he died, the loop would be triggered, and everything would restart immediately. Everything would return to the beginning, leaving room for recovery!
Not only had Lumian considered provoking Valentine to commit suicide to verify the nature of the loop, but he had also thought of sacrificing his own life in an emergency!
Compared to the current situation, what was there to fear?
He gazed at Pons Bénet, whose expression was vicious, and his purple lips quivered as if to say: "Please, kill me quickly."

Chapter 105: That Person

Pons Bénet's grip tightened relentlessly, his eyes bloodshot and bulging.

If it hadn't been for the fact that Lumian couldn't speak or that his vision had started to fade to black, he would have thanked him.

Suddenly, a hand appeared from nowhere, grasping Pons Bénet's hair at the back of his head, trying to forcibly pry him off Lumian.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to kill him? Have you lost your damn mind?"

Pierre Berry growled in a deep voice as he intervened, stopping Pons Bénet.

But Pons Bénet wouldn't listen. His crimson eyes locked onto Lumian, his mind consumed by fury and murderous intent. All he could think of was killing this bastard.

Whack!

Pierre Berry swung his right leg up, striking Pons Bénet's groin with his brand-new leather shoe.

Pons Bénet reflexively let go, clutching his crotch, squeezing his thighs together, and collapsing to the ground.

He whimpered involuntarily, his face contorted in agony, like a rooster being strangled by the neck.

Pierre Berry glanced at him coolly and said, "Once you've recovered, bring Lumian to the altar. The ritual is about to begin."

He shifted his gaze, bending down to assess Lumian's condition.

As Lumian's senses returned and he slowly opened his eyes, he straightened up and nodded.

His darkening vision restored to clarity, the pain in his neck became more apparent. Lumian was disheartened to find that his view was not of the familiar ceiling of his bedroom but of Pierre Berry's bloodied face.

Am I still alive? He wondered subconsciously as he turned his head and spotted Pons Bénet curled up on the ground.

"Pathetic!" Lumian spat contemptuously. "If you can't satisfy women and can't even kill a man, what's the point of living?"

Pons Bénet felt a wave of rage surge through his head. If it weren't for the lingering pain in his groin and Pierre Berry's watchful eye, he would have snapped once more.

...

Lumian and Aurore's house lay in ruins, more than half its roof missing.

Ryan, Leah, and Valentine crept back under the moon and starlight.

Once they confirmed the area was clear, Ryan turned to Leah and

said, "Tonight's situation is worse than we thought. Perform divination."
As they traveled from Cordu Village to Lumian's house, they noticed that every house was empty. They had no idea where everyone had gone.
This was a shocking anomaly!
"Alright." Leah nodded.
Before she could take out a pen and paper to write a divination statement, Ryan reminded her, "Be cautious. Choose the direction of the divination carefully. Don't attempt it if it feels too risky."
"Understood." Leah was well-versed in this area. She knew that Cordu was a place filled with danger and abnormalities. A minor error in the divination direction could lead to severe injuries or loss of control.
After a few moments of contemplation, she entered Aurore's bedroom, which now lacked a wall along the corridor, and found a manuscript to use as a medium.
As Leah wrote the divination statement, Ryan and Valentine entered Lumian's room where they had been sleeping.
Ryan's brownish-yellow suitcase sat beside the desk near the window, concealed by the curtain.
Seeing that the item was still there, Ryan breathed a sigh of relief and said to Valentine, "Make the preparations."
As he spoke, he pulled the suitcase out, placed it on the ground, and undid the brass-like metal buckle.
Valentine opened his arms slightly, and illusory golden flames emerged from the void, illuminating the room.
With Sunlight, Ryan finally dared to open his suitcase with a grave expression.
Inside, there were no clothes, books, or coins—just a strange, folded scarecrow lying quietly.
The scarecrow's eyes were covered with thick black cloth strips. Its face, neck, palms, feet, and calves were made of brownish-green straw, but its arms, chest, and thighs were covered in real, slightly pale-white skin.
This was a mystical item that the joint investigation team had acquired from the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Riston diocese before their departure.
Teams at their level could request Sealed Artifacts to handle abnormalities.
Ryan closed his eyes, and information about the mystical item before him naturally surfaced in his mind.
"Number: 217
"Name: Tanago Scarecrow.

"Danger Grade: 2. Dangerous. Use with care and moderation. It can only be applied for operations that require three or more people. Security clearance requires a diocesan bishop.
"Security classification: Bishop, Team Captain, or above.
"Description: This scarecrow was first discovered in the Tanago region of Riston Province, near the remnants of a village annihilated by a cult's worship ritual.
"Two Purifiers, ten police officers, and 76 farmers vanished after passing by the farm where the scarecrow was placed, never to be seen again.
"Research suggests that those who enter a 30-meter radius of the scarecrow and lock eyes with it will lose self-awareness and be drawn towards it uncontrollably. Within moments, they disappear, leaving behind only their possessions and garments.
"At the zenith of sunlight, the scarecrow loses its power; touching it or meeting its gaze has no effect.
"A farmer from a neighboring village claims the scarecrow was once ordinary, indistinguishable from others until the village farmland it protected was decimated.
"With each disappearance, flesh and skin appear on a small portion of the scarecrow.
"Its ultimate transformation remains a mystery, but revival seems a likely outcome.
"The scarecrow already displays signs of life, moving at night and attempting to break free from its containment.
"Sealing Method: Blindfold it with a thick, black cloth and enclose it in a confined, dark space.
"Usage Process: Remove the scarecrow only under sunlight, and unbind the black cloth from its eyes.
"Appendix: 1. Avoid its gaze at all costs. Even under the protection of sunlight, you risk enduring lasting nightmares and mental debilitation.
"2. Limit interaction with the scarecrow to no more than two minutes per session. Excessive use intensifies its determination to escape and resist.
"3. Warning: Permanently seal the scarecrow before it acquires enough flesh."
As Ryan and Valentine investigated the Sealed Artifact's possible loss or escape, Leah entered a dream divination state.
Whispering the divination incantation to locate Aurore, she sat at her desk, reclined in her chair, closed her eyes, and quickly drifted into slumber.
Guided by her four silver bells, Leah glimpsed Aurore, clad in a simple white robe, in a surreal, distorted world. She recognized an

altar, nearby villagers, and the distant stained glass and golden walls of a cathedral...
Leah's eyes flew open, and she bolted from the room. Breathlessly, she informed Ryan and Valentine, "They're all at the cathedral! Performing a ritual!"
...
Inside the cathedral of the Eternal Blazing Sun.
Pons Bénet carried the disappointed Lumian toward the altar adorned with lilacs and tulips. Pierre Berry, keeping a watchful eye, accompanied them.
Glancing at his sister Aurore, her eyes vacant, Lumian turned to Pierre Berry and sneered.
"You're nothing but a coward and a piece of trash!"
The shepherd shot him a glance but remained silent, his expression unchanging.
Undeterred, Lumian continued, grinning, "Your woman died of illness, yet you did nothing. You just put your faith in a malevolent god. Didn't she die because the factory owner overworked her and paid her next to nothing? If I were you, I'd have hunted down that boss and hung his whole family from the factory chimney! But you didn't! You were too scared. Scared you'd die too. Trash, coward!"
As Lumian studied Pierre Berry's subtle reactions, he slyly added Provocation to his final words.
Pierre Berry's expression contorted; his gentle gaze slowly morphed into a menacing glare, as if a hidden seal had been broken, unleashing the demon within.
Padre Guillaume Bénet, at the altar, barked sternly, "Control yourself!"
Pierre Berry shuddered and came to his senses.
In retaliation, he ripped a piece of cloth from his ragged attire, crumpled it into a ball, and shoved it into Lumian's mouth.
F*ck! Lumian struggled fiercely, but to no avail.
He kept cursing and adding Provocation, but time was against him. His mouth was fully gagged by the cloth, and he could no longer speak.
Panic and despair welled up in Lumian's heart, threatening to overwhelm him.
He desperately reined in his emotions, warding off any thoughts of surrender.
Carried to the altar, Lumian's mind raced, searching for alternative ways to end his life.
Soon, he was presented before the padre, the massive black thorn symbol separating him from Aurore.
Guillaume Bénet motioned for Pierre Berry to help Lumian to his

feet, then scrutinized the young man's face and smiled.
"You're tougher than I thought, but you're still lacking. The world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him, yet you have none. No one to teach you the ways of life."
"The world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him" was a popular saying in Intis. It referred to both a biological father and a societal father—often known as a godfather.
This was why the people of Intis often acknowledged godfathers and godmothers.
The padre taunted Lumian for being an orphan, with neither a godfather nor a father.
In response, Lumian wished he could retort, mocking the padre about his own child having three, no, four fathers—the padre himself, his godfather, his mother's lover... If the gag hadn't held tight, Lumian would definitely have taunted the padre enough to make him lose his mind, killing him on the spot.
Unfortunately, he couldn't say anything.
"Should we begin the ritual now?" Pierre Berry inquired of Guillaume Bénet.
The padre shook his head.
"Let's wait a bit longer."
"What for?" Pierre Berry asked, puzzled.
The padre offered no answer, but Lumian was already devising a new suicide plan.
Suddenly, inspiration struck.
Enter a deep Cogitation state and submit to the scrutiny of the two entities. Eagerly, he sought the enigmatic and horrifying voice, hoping to provoke his own breakdown and loss of control.
Lumian glanced at Aurore, her face blank and her eyes empty, but otherwise unchanged. He closed his eyes.
First, he envisioned the crimson sun. Once calm, he transformed it into the orb adorned with eyes and a cross.
Silently, Lumian "saw" the faint gray fog once more. He "saw" the chaos of overlapping colors and indescribable, non-existent things.
Yet this time, he didn't sense the gaze of an entity lurking within the fog or looming high above.
Why is it different? Lumian's eyes snapped open in surprise.
Just then, a figure entered through the cathedral doors.
Clad in a black robe and a wide hood, the man's face was obscured by shadows. He stood tall, around 1.8 meters in height.
As the mysterious figure approached the altar, the padre stepped aside deferentially, his demeanor humble and reverent.
Who is that? The one behind the padre? Lumian puzzled, peering closer.

The more he studied the man, the more familiar he seemed, as though Lumian had encountered him before.
Suddenly, it clicked.
This was the figure lurking in the corner of the Warlock's tomb!
The black-robed man ascended the altar and stood before Lumian. Leaning forward slightly, he stifled a chuckle.
"Did you realize that Cogitation is useless?"
What? *How does he know?* Lumian stared at him, shocked and bewildered.
At this proximity, even with the hood concealing his features, Lumian could discern the black-robed man's face.
He was a young man in his late teens, his limbs long and lean, his hair short and jet-black, his eyes a light blue, and his features sharply chiseled. He was strikingly handsome.
What... Lumian's gaze locked onto the man.
He knew this face all too well. He saw it every day when he looked in the mirror.
It was himself!

Chapter 106: The Ritual Begins

Lumian noticed that the black-robed man's face was nearly identical to his own, save for a few subtle differences.

The depths of the stranger's light-blue eyes held a faint silver-black hue. It was unclear whether the shadow of the hood affected the man's complexion or if his skin was naturally a shade darker.

"Who are you?!" Lumian blurted out in shock, his words muffled by the cloth in his mouth, leaving only indistinct movements.

The black-robed man smiled without introducing himself, turning and walking towards the padre.

Lumian strained to follow, desperate to learn the man's identity, his purpose, and why he had appeared in the dead Warlock's tomb. This was crucial to him.

Although the padre's ability to retain memories within the loop was surprising, it wasn't inexplicable. Lumian's theories about the nature of the loop could account for such an anomaly. After all, Madame Pualis was a prime example.

However, the black-robed man's sudden appearance was entirely unexpected. It wasn't his presence that was startling; Lumian had always suspected another individual, apart from the owl and the occupant of the coffin, to be the mastermind behind Cordu's abnormalities.

What truly shocked him was the striking resemblance between the black-robed man and himself. It suggested the man could be another version of Lumian.

His theories about the loop's nature failed to explain this baffling revelation!

Something's not right! Lumian struggled to lean forward, but the ropes held him fast, causing him to crash onto the altar with a thud.

His nose, which had ceased bleeding, began to flow anew, and the red, swollen wounds grew more prominent.

Undeterred, Lumian pressed on. Unable to use his limbs, he relied on Dancer's incredible flexibility, slithering towards the black-robed man with great difficulty.

His mind raced with thoughts.

I have to find out who this black-robed man is and why he's here!

This must be a manifestation of the loop's essence. Unraveling this secret could provide hope of using the loop to escape the current predicament and ultimately resolve the anomalies plaguing Cordu!

Drip, drip. Blood from Lumian's face stained the ground a vibrant red. His body smeared the crimson hue in all directions as he writhed in his struggle. The scene was chaotic and reeked of blood.

He strained to reach the black-robed man, but couldn't utter a sound. His face, contorted by pain and anxiety, was a horrifying sight.
The black-robed man, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Lumian, glanced down and instructed the padre, Guillaume Bénet, "Begin the ritual."
"Alright," Guillaume Bénet told Pierre Berry at the edge of the altar. "Bring Lumian to the altar."
Pierre Berry strode over, gripped Lumian under his arm, and hoisted him up.
No! Lumian thrashed with all his might, like a fish freshly yanked from the water.
Pierre Berry nearly lost his grip due to Lumian's "slipperiness."
The gentleness in Pierre's eyes quickly vanished, replaced by a ferocious and brutal glint.
His strength surged as he forcefully restrained Lumian and flung him onto the altar.
Afterward, Pierre Berry glanced at Lumian and chuckled.
"You better hope you die during the ritual rather than live through it. You'll regret it, I promise."
Is this a response to my earlier Provocation? Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he saw Aurore, clad in a simple white robe, approach his side.
She leaned against the altar adorned with lilacs and tulips, her gaze vacant as she stared at her brother.
The cathedral's villagers swarmed forward, forming a semi-circle around the altar.
The padre retrieved two grayish-white candles, positioning them at the corresponding locations of Aurore and Lumian.
Next, he placed a candle beneath his feet, creating a pattern on the altar with two candles above and one below.
After a few moments, the padre ignited the three candles in sequence, from top to bottom and left to right, using his spirituality.
A faint sweetness wafted into Lumian's nostrils, leaving him disoriented. The scene felt inexplicably familiar.
...
Ryan, Leah, and Valentine stealthily approached the side of the Eternal Blazing Sun Cathedral, clutching a brownish-yellow suitcase.
Hidden in the shadows, they peered through the stained glass to see the Eternal Blazing Sun's altar transformed. They spotted Lumian bound on the left and Aurore standing on the right. They saw the padre facing the siblings, a lit grayish-white candle

beneath his feet, flanked by the enigmatic black-robed man and Pierre Berry.
Valentine's fists clenched as a golden light flickered in his eyes.
Leah cast a sidelong glance at him, concerned her companion might be consumed by rage.
Fortunately, Valentine was a seasoned Purifier who had completed numerous missions. He understood what needed to be done and what to avoid.
Ryan averted his gaze and lowered his voice. "We'll move closer to the altar, shatter the glass, and launch a surprise attack. Our goal is to grab Lumian and Aurore and be out of the village within a minute.
"If we don't achieve our objective in that time, abort the mission and flee to the river. Trigger the loop proactively."
"Alright," Valentine and Leah murmured in hushed tones, each nodding in agreement.
Ryan added, "Valentine, ready Sunlight. We can't hold back any longer. We have to deploy 2-217 now."
"No problem," Valentine responded as Leah retrieved a box of matches.
She manipulated the silver bell on her veil and boots, sprinting around Cordu's square at breakneck speed while tossing matches at various points.
This marked a predetermined escape route.
Magicians didn't perform unprepared.
Once Leah had completed her task, the trio of official investigators cautiously circled beneath the stained glass to the side of the altar.
Valentine peered inside and told Ryan, "The ritual is about to commence. We must act now."
Ryan, also observing the cathedral's interior, furrowed his brow and asked, "Did you notice anything off?"
Leah hastily replayed the scene she had just witnessed in her mind, replying with apprehension, "I can't hear anything from inside!"
They were a mere three meters from the closest villagers, yet they couldn't discern any sound emanating from within. The villagers were clearly engaged in animated conversation!
Ryan's eyes narrowed, and a suspicion instantly took shape in his mind.
He stood up and rammed into the stained-glass window before him, disregarding that the cultists inside the cathedral might discover his presence.
Clangs echoed as the delicate glass remained unbroken, but the villagers within the cathedral seemed oblivious to the chaos

outside.
As Ryan summoned the Dawn Armor and Sword of Dawn, Leah sprinted in circles outside the window.
This time, not a single deliberately uncontrolled silver bell jingled.
From Leah's perspective, this implied there was no danger; yet, how could there be no threat emanating from the cathedral?
Thus, she concluded that the correct answer was: The situation was extremely dangerous!
It was so dangerous that the silver bell Sealed Artifacts were utterly disrupted or dared not react!
Bang!
The Sword of Dawn, forged from light, struck a pane of stained glass but failed to have any impact. It seemed as if the entire cathedral was shrouded by an invisible, terrifying force that barred outsiders from entry.
A brilliant pillar of light, encircled by flames, descended from the sky as Valentine spread his arms. However, it didn't appear inside the cathedral as he had anticipated. Instead, it landed outside the stained glass, causing ripples.
It appeared that the interior and exterior were entirely isolated.
Ryan made a quick decision and said to Valentine and Leah, "Let's try the Sealed Artifact. If it doesn't work, we'll leave the village to trigger the loop."
Ryan didn't suggest immediate retreat because he hoped to barge in and save Lumian and Aurore. He suspected that once the ritual truly began, the loop might be affected. In that case, they wouldn't be able to leave Cordu or restart everything there.
Wasting no time, Valentine summoned the illusory golden flames.
With two pops, Ryan opened the suitcase and retrieved the Tanago Scarecrow, its skin already half-covered.
He pressed the Scarecrow's front against the stained glass and untied the thick black cloth.
A pair of human-like eyes appeared on 2-217's face, devoid of emotion and embedded within the brownish-green straw.
The eyes swiveled and locked onto Pons Bénet, standing at the edge of the altar.
The villain froze, then bolted toward the window.
As he ran, his body vanished, leaving his clothes to flutter to the ground and cover his leather shoes.
A piece of skin-covered flesh emerged on the Tanago Scarecrow's neck, fusing with the stalk below.
"It works!" Ryan and the others exclaimed, elated.
This meant that breaking into the cathedral wasn't impossible, and the altar's protection was not impregnable!

...
"The horoscope is about to change!"
"It's finally happening!"
"..."
Amidst the villagers' uproar and the surrounding scent of gray amber, cloves, musk, and tulips, Lumian experienced an uncanny sense of déjà vu. Relying on Dancer's flexibility, he forced his upper body up despite being bound.
The next second, he saw the padre open his mouth and shout in ancient Hermes, "The mighty Circle of Inevitability!"
As soon as the words left his lips, darkness enveloped the cathedral's interior, and the villagers fell silent.
The orange flames on the three candles were reduced to the size of pepper granules, now tainted silver and black.
Lumian's mind buzzed as the familiar burning sensation ignited in his chest.
His vision blurred, and the vacant-eyed Aurore, the solemn-looking padre, and the hooded black-robed man appeared before him in layers beneath the dazzling gold dome.
A sharp pain stabbed at his head, as if something was being yanked from the depths of his memory. It felt eerily similar to the scene unfolding before him.
The sense of familiarity and déjà vu surged within Lumian's heart, dozens or even hundreds of times stronger than before.
Thump, thump!
He could hear his heart pounding.

Chapter 107: Shattering

Thump, thump!

Lumian felt his heartbeat pounding, as images were painstakingly dragged from the depths of his memories.

His head threatened to split open. He fought against it, unwilling to continue.

Outside the stained glass, Ryan observed the ritual beginning. He tossed the Tanago Scarecrow to Leah without hesitation, signaling her to use the Sealed Artifact against the padre. He hefted the Sword of Dawn.

Beneath the golden flames, Leah and Valentine moved to another stained glass window, a half-exposed cylindrical wall separating them from Ryan.

They did this to evade the damage from the Hurricane of Light without hindering their movements. With the cathedral's "defensive capability," they believed a barrier between them would suffice. After all, Ryan would do his best to control the attack's direction.

Leah embraced the Tanago Scarecrow from behind, pressing it against the stained glass depicting St. Sith's sermon. She aimed at the altar and Guillaume Bénet, the padre leading the ritual.

On the other side, Ryan gripped the handle with both hands, plunging the Sword of Dawn into the windowsill.

The two-handed broadsword, forged from pure light, shattered and transformed into a whirlwind of razor-sharp fragments and specks of light.

The Hurricane exploded and slammed into the stained glass before him.

With a cracking sound, the entire cathedral trembled. Hairline fractures spider-webbed across the glass surface.

But it held fast.

Seeing this, Ryan summoned the minuscule particles of Sunrise Gleam, forging a massive two-handed axe.

Unable to use Hurricane of Light for now, he switched weapons.

Leah and Valentine, shielded by the protruding wall, dodged the Hurricane of Light's remnants. At that moment, the Tanago Scarecrow's gaze locked onto the priest. Its eyes, set in the brownish-green straw, reflected the white-robed figure with golden threads.

Leah noticed a faint silver light tinged with black materialize around the altar where Guillaume Bénet stood.

With a snap, the Tanago Scarecrow's eyes burst open, weeping blood-red tears.

The padre glanced over before looking away.
As two sheep "willingly" entered the altar, he intoned the incantation with calm fanaticism.
"You are the eternal cycle, the predestined destiny, the cause, the effect, and the process!"
Suddenly, the two deity-representing candles on the altar elongated to the size of a human head.
A howling wind swept through the cathedral, turning the villagers to statues. But silver-black warts emerged from their exposed faces and hands.
The silver-black light enveloping the altar rapidly spread, engulfing the entire cathedral.
The mural-filled dome became transparent. Clouds dispersed, and the crimson moon darkened to the shade of blood.
The stars on the black velvet backdrop flickered into existence, one by one, glowing with the intensity of the sun.
In an instant, night became day. The villagers stirred and murmured dreamily.
"The horoscope has changed..."
"Fortune is here..."
With three thuds, Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who hadn't heard but had witnessed the scene, crumpled to the ground. They writhed, wailed, and screamed in agony.
Ryan's skin turned grayish-blue, Leah's face appeared to teem with maggots and pulsing tendrils, and Valentine radiated a sun-like glow, from inside to out, from top to bottom.
They were on the brink of losing control.
The Tanago Scarecrow lay cast aside, trembling violently.
Lumian felt his chest burn as the terrifying voice, seemingly originating from an infinite distance and yet right beside him, echoed in his ears.
Invisible steel drills penetrated his skull, stirring his brain. Blood vessels bulged in pain, and silvery-black spots emerged beneath his skin.
An unseen force enveloped him, lifting him from the altar.
The ropes binding him and the cloth gagging him crumbled to dust and dispersed in the air.
Aurore, too, was hoisted by this invisible force, floating above the altar and facing Lumian.
His bloodshot eyes mirrored his sister's long blonde hair, vacant light-blue eyes, pristine and emotionless face, and the simple yet odd white robe she wore.
He recoiled, sensing a familiar déjà vu from the depths of his memories. The pain was as intense as the madness.

The surrounding scenes melded together in Lumian's mind:
The padre's solemn and fanatical expression;
The black-robed man advancing toward the altar;
Pierre Berry prostrate on the ground;
The transparent cathedral dome;
The crimson moon and constellations in the sky;
The villagers with stiff expressions, welcoming their fortune;
Aurore, her face contorted with pain...
Lumian's head spun as his body was torn apart by an invisible force, silver-black spots multiplying on his skin.
He was powerless to break free or resist effectively.
"Ah!"
Lumian screamed involuntarily as his chest was gradually pried open, casting a silvery-black light onto Aurore.
Aurore's eyes darted around, hearing the agonized cry.
Her empty gaze mirrored Lumian's swollen blood vessels, his twisted face with silver-black hues beneath the surface.
After a momentary pause, she instinctively reached out and pushed Lumian away from danger.
Grande Soeur... Lumian stared, dumbfounded, as Aurore shoved him out of the altar's reach.
Suddenly, the dreadful sound in his ears vanished, and the invisible restraints on his body disappeared. The burning sensation across his skin subsided.
Yet the pain in his head remained unchanged. Deep-rooted memories were forcibly dredged up.
It was as if someone had used a hook to slowly extract his brain from his skull.
Aurore's light-blue eyes tainted with silver-black, her blank stare, her lifeless face, and her resolute, forceful actions pushing him away flashed in Lumian's mind. It was nearly identical to what he'd witnessed moments ago, but the black-robed man was missing from the background.
This amplified déjà vu led Lumian to instinctively question if something similar had happened before. He screamed in pain once more.
Bam! He plummeted to the ground after leaving the altar.
Ignoring the excruciating pain in his head and his disorientation, Lumian sprang up, prepared to seize Aurore and flee the altar with his sister.
A figure obstructed his path. The black-robed man wearing his face struck him on the right cheek, sending him sprawling to the ground.
Lumian refused to give in. With desperate courage, he rose again

and lunged at the black-robed man blocking his way.
Whack!
The black-robed man swung his fist, and Lumian instinctively evaded.
He stood stunned for a moment before a twisted smile crept across his face. He snarled, "Why are you so damn weak? As weak as me!"
Lumian dismissed thoughts of the padre and Pierre Berry as he lunged at the black-robed man.
The man sidestepped, raising his right foot to trip Lumian's calf.
Lumian didn't evade. With the terrifying flexibility of a dancer, he forced a half-turn and extended his arm to grapple his foe.
Thud! He tumbled to the ground, taking the black-robed man down with him.
The man nimbly raised his right hand, gripping Lumian's throat and delivering a brutal knee to his groin.
Lumian didn't flinch. Bloodshot eyes locked on his opponent, he clawed at the man's eyes with his right hand.
"Ah!"
The black-robed man screamed as Lumian tore out his eyeballs, blood spurting forth. Lumian instinctively curled up, nearly passing out from the agony in his lower body.
Struggling to his feet, he shot the writhing man on the ground a sinister grin.
"Come on! Let's die together! You coward! Coward!"
He lunged once more, encircling the man's neck with his arms.
At that moment, Pierre Berry, at the edge of the altar, staggered to his feet. Brandishing his axe, he sprinted to Lumian's side.
Whack!
His axe descended, only to be halted by a faint gray mist that had materialized. It failed to harm Lumian.
Pierre Berry employed two different abilities, but couldn't penetrate the gray fog's defense.
Guillaume Bénet, the priest, didn't hesitate and began reciting a prayer.
"I implore you,
"I beseech your benediction.
"I plead with you to grant me..."
Before he could finish, the scene transformed.
The constellations in the sky shifted incrementally, deviating from their original positions.
Cordu trembled violently as every house and inch of soil surged toward the cathedral.
Silently, the villagers decomposed into organs. Eyeballs, mouths, noses, hearts, fingers, and flesh...

A scant few reassembled into different people. Some appeared normal, others malformed, some missing parts, and some with extra appendages.
The majority hurtled toward the altar and Aurore.
Cracks spread across Aurore's body, and she swiftly disintegrated into countless pieces of flesh.
Witnessing this, Lumian spiraled into despair.
Still, he refused to surrender. Seizing the black-robed man's head, he twisted it violently, snapping his neck under the man's horrified gaze.
Lumian rose and raced toward his sister.
But an invisible barrier surrounding Aurore obstructed his path.
Rumble!
With a muffled thud, the cathedral began to ascend. Trees, soil, and boulders from outside the village soared, accompanied by houses, furniture, and miscellaneous items.
The organs of most villagers merged with Aurore's flesh at the altar, contorting and writhing before morphing into a colossal being.
The giant stood four to five meters tall, boasting three heads and six arms. Its entire form was composed of flesh and organ fragments, its body riddled with cracks oozing yellow pus.
The central head of the giant, filled with pain and regret, strained to gaze at Lumian.
Transparent, blood-hued tears trickled from the corners of "his" eyes.
Witnessing this, Lumian's mind reeled as if cleaved by an axe.
His vision wavered as he "saw" the shattered cathedral, the steadily rising blood-red "peak," the thorny "city wall" formed by distorted houses, the encircling ruins around the "peak," and the various monsters forced to flee the area...
What... Lumian's head throbbed with pain again.
As he watched countless tiny beams of light shoot from the giant and surrounding monsters, landing on his chest, he realized that the scenes buried deep in his memories had been entirely unearthed. They were nearly identical to what he saw now.
This is... Lumian abruptly had a hunch, and his headache worsened.
Suddenly, everything before him turned eerily illusory, with pronounced cracks appearing like broken glass.
This is! Lumian finally recalled something.
Then, he saw the black-robed man transform into a pitch-black, repulsive liquid that soared before him and seeped into his left chest.

"Ah!"
Lumian screamed in agony as his surroundings crumbled.
He snapped his eyes open and found himself lying beneath the blood-red mountain peak. The encroaching darkness, signaling the onset of night, had nearly vanished.
Lumian instinctively sat up, leaning forward. He placed his hands on the ground and scanned his surroundings.
He saw a twisted, thorny "wall," a barren landscape devoid of vegetation, and the dream ruins beyond. He spotted Ryan, Leah, and Valentine lying at the edge of a room not far away.
They were sound asleep.
Lumian abruptly bowed his head, raised his hands, grasped his hair, and whispered in anguish, "Is reality a dream, and the dream reality? Is this the present or the past? Aurore. Is Aurore beyond saving?"
"Yes." A woman's voice echoed in the ruins.
Lumian looked up, bewildered, and faintly saw the enigmatic woman appear before him.
She approached, wearing the orange dress she'd donned at the beginning.
"That's why you were so desperate to obtain superpowers in your dream, regardless of the consequences. That's why you disregarded others' lives and even your own. You wanted to resolve the loop embodying the concept of a 'problem' as quickly as possible. That's why you couldn't control your instincts and uttered inappropriate words or performed inappropriate actions on certain occasions..."
Lumian gazed at the mysterious woman, dazed, realizing that the indescribable and inexplicable emotion in her eyes had resurfaced. This time, he could finally decipher it.
It was pity.

Chapter 108: Report

Several days later, an investigation report on Cordu Village was submitted to Intis Intelligence and Homeland Security Committee's Bureau 8, the Machinery Hivemind of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, and the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Inquisition.

Upon receipt, the brass immediately reviewed the report.

Background: Over the past year, numerous disappearances have occurred in the Feynapotter Kingdom's Grabaka Province, near the DariÃ¨ge region, and in the Lenburg Republic's Upper Hel state. Several Beyonders without official permission have mysteriously vanished, and these incidents seem to be connected to shepherds traveling across the three regions. Among them, those from Cordu Village became our primary focus.

Consequently, after receiving an unusual distress letter, we prioritized the mobilization of elite personnel and dispatched them as a joint investigation team.

The investigators' complete written statements are as follows:

The anomaly in Cordu Village can be categorized into two levels: reality and dreamscape.

Reality:

Cordu was ultimately destroyed by a large-scale but unsuccessful evil god sacrificial ritual. Only a small number of villagers survived.

Most villagers were utilized as nutrients for the failed creation of an evil god. The remaining individuals were reassembled in peculiar ways and transformed into various monsters.

The evil god sacrificial ritual altered the landscape. The river dried up and changed course. The village square and cathedral were elevated nearly 40 meters by a small-scale orogeny, forming a blood-colored pillar.

The failed evil god creation was located atop the pillar. However, when we discovered it, it had already been destroyed, potentially by self-destruction or interference from other factions.

Cordu's houses also underwent reassembly. Some formed a twisted, thorny city wall around the blood-colored pillar, while others were arranged in circular patterns...

In these severely damaged buildings, we found only a few coins and the most common livre bleu. We did not find any written information or anything that could clearly identify Cordu. The reason remains unknown.

Only the house of Lumian Lee--the target--contained books, newspapers, magazines, and other items that clearly identified it.

Within the ruins of Cordu, there are two abnormal areas surrounding the blood-colored pillar. One can induce a deep slumber, leading to a dreamscape, while the other is teeming with life, filled with flowers and trees, and features a self-rocking crib.
Our assumption regarding the latter area is that it is closely related to Madame Pualis of Cordu. (For a detailed explanation, refer to the Dreamscape section.)
At the other edge of the blood-colored pillar, we unearthed four relatively well-preserved corpses. The location likely corresponds to the original cathedral cemetery.
The first corpse was a woman, no more than twenty years old, who had been strangled to death.
The second corpse was a young man, also no more than twenty years old, who had drowned.
The third corpse was surrounded by coffin fragments. Female, over 60 years old, and died of mechanical asphyxiation. Based on other evidence, we speculate that she was suffocated with a pillow.
The fourth corpse was male and had not decomposed. His tongue had been severed while he was alive, and there were visible ligature marks on his neck.
Relevant speculations about the aforementioned corpses can be found in the Dreamscape section.
...
Upon entering the ruins of Cordu, we were likely affected by the power emanating from Lumian Lee's body. Our memories of the date became disordered, and the thought of leaving ceased to occur to us.
One by one, we fell asleep. While in the dream state, our bodies maintained a weak level of activity, eliminating the need for food replenishment for several days. Had we remained in this state for another half a month, it is uncertain whether we would have awoken from hunger or perished within the dream.
The entire ruin is locked in a loop capable of reverting to its original state at any moment. The trigger point is most likely tied to Lumian Lee's self-awareness and the restrictions he imposes. The former refers to the inevitable restart if Lumian Lee's subconscious anticipates it, while the latter stems from his desire to prevent anyone from disrupting Cordu's current state and the development of the dream. Any relevant event would immediately trigger a restart.
...
We inquired with villagers from surrounding areas, but they reported no abnormalities concerning Cordu.
Through their responses and previously gathered information, we

confirmed three points:
First, there was never a legend of a deceased Warlock in Cordu (this refers to a story told by Lumian Lee in the dreamscape: Once, a Warlock lived in Cordu. After his death, an owl perched on his bed head for a time before flying away. The Warlock's corpse grew heavy, requiring nine bulls to transport it);
Second, no elves suspected of being in the form of lizards have appeared in the DariÃ¨ge area.
Third, Lent is traditional folklore and had no issues originally.
...
Dreamscape:
The dreamscape originated from Lumian Lee and is so realistic that we couldn't discern that we were dreaming.
We consulted psychologists and dream experts and synthesized their opinions to form a hypothesis about this dream.
It is an amalgamation of Lumian Lee's personal experiences, all the novels he has read, and his assumptions and conjectures based on previous events. The dream exhibits obvious coincidences and characteristics of wish fulfillment at certain critical junctures.
Within this dreamscape, not all the situations we encountered were real, nor were they entirely fabricated.
Disorganized facts, the minutiae of daily interactions, and the illusory scenes that left a profound impact on Lumian Lee were reassembled in a chaotic and symbolic manner, presenting themselves to us.
This is both a characteristic of the dreamscape and a manifestation of Lumian Lee's subconscious avoidance or fear of certain issues.
Moving forward, we will provide a detailed account of every aspect of our experience:
...
We ought to have realized that we were in a dream earlier on. The most evident clue was that we did not recall needing to change our clothes until Lumian Lee reminded us that our garments were severely damaged.
Though this is quite unusual, humans tend not to think critically within dreams.
It has been confirmed that we did not send telegrams. The corresponding responses may have originated from Lumian Lee's subconscious and the knowledge he possesses.
By combining the events in the dream with the situation in reality, we have arrived at the following conjectures:
Our consciousness and knowledge, to some extent, enriched the dream, and we may have inadvertently exposed some of our

secrets to Lumian Lee.
There are at least two distinct evil god faiths in Cordu. One represents a power akin to Earth Mother's, embodied by Administrator Béost's wife, Madame Pualis. The other is the one followed by Guillaume Bénet, the former padre, and the majority of the villagers. The latter faith ultimately led to Cordu's destruction.
During the Lent celebration, the Spring Elf's beheading and send-off symbolized driving the force representing Madame Pualis out of Cordu. There may have been a violent conflict between the two factions. Simultaneously, the decapitation of Ava Lizier, the personification of the Spring Elf, symbolized that this girl had discovered something amiss in reality. When she attempted to escape or inform others, she was clandestinely strangled to death by Guillaume Bénet's group.
Reimund Greg was thrown into the river. The appearance of his Spirit Body beneath the cathedral symbolizes that, like Ava, he was deemed a snitch and subsequently drowned.
Jean Maury discovered that his wife, Sybil, had an affair with the former padre. In a fit of rage, he became mute. This symbolized that as a devout follower of the Eternal Blazing Sun, his tongue was cut off when he tried to inform others about the village's abnormalities. His subsequent disappearance implied that he had been murdered.
Naroka's death shares the same potent symbolism as Ava, Reimund, and Jean. First, she must have covertly followed Madame Pualis, intending to allow her deceased husband's spirit to return home through the aid of the soul messenger. Thus, her post-death behavior was to enter Paramita. Second, it is highly likely that she was killed by her youngest son, Arnault André, likely because she had discovered the issue with Guillaume Bénet's group and wanted to inform Madame Pualis.
Based on our search of the ruins, the Lent celebration, and Madame Pualis's claim that she could depart at a specific moment, it is implied that she, her husband Béost, butler Louis Lund, and lady's maid Cathy left Cordu before the ritual on the twelfth night. They remain alive, and their whereabouts are unknown.
This is reflected in the dream by the lady's refusal to assist at critical moments.
However, considering the circumstances in the peculiar area teeming with vitality, we suspect that Madame Pualis left something behind before her departure and indirectly participated in the ritual on the twelfth night.
The black-robed man in the Warlock's tomb likely symbolizes

Lumian Lee's mutated persona due to his corruption. However, for some reason, Lumian Lee did not appear to be deeply corrupted, enabling him to easily triumph during the skirmish, given his increased courage...
The bizarre lizard-like creature found in the mouths of Aurore Lee, Michel Garrigue, and others might symbolize their corruption and mutation, eventually transforming them into an alternate version of themselves.
...
Questions:
1. How is Lumian Lee aware of the abilities of Guillaume Bénet, Pierre Berry, and others? If he had secretly observed them in reality, it would be understandable if he remained undetected once or twice. There must be an inherent reason why he could obtain so much information without facing consequences.
2. Why did the villagers and Aurore Lee behave indistinguishably from real people, making it challenging for us to recognize that we were in a dream until Lumian Lee believed that something abnormal should have occurred to them?
3. *What does Paramita symbolize?*
4. What do Madame Pualis's numerous children in the castle and the crib with an invisible object represent?
5. Why did Lumian Lee use lizard-like elves to portray the villagers' corruption?
6. What do Lumian Lee and Aurore Lee's attempts to escape Cordu and enter Paramita signify?
7. *Why did the ritual on the twelfth night fail?*
8. *How can Lumian Lee enable us to enter his dream?* He evidently lacks the ability to do so.
9. *Why did he suddenly acquire normal Beyonder powers?*
10. How did he survive and cause the ruins of Cordu to enter a loop?
11. Aurore Lee's abnormalities occurred at entirely different times during the two cycles. *What does this indicate?*
12. *What does the legend of the deceased Warlock symbolize?*
13. What does the Warlock's corpse in the coffin in the underground tomb represent?
14. *What does the owl symbolize?*
15. *What does the change in the horoscope signify?*
16. *What is the origin of the matter?*
...
Conclusions and Recommendations:
This is a quintessential disaster resulting from the worship of an evil god. Currently, six known survivors exist:

Lumian Lee, former padre Guillaume Bénet, Pualis de Roquefort, Béost, Louis Lund, and Cathy.
The latter five are adherents of evil gods. We must locate and eliminate them as soon as possible.
Directly killing Lumian Lee is not advised. Until his issues are understood and resolved, his death might trigger an even more severe anomaly. The optimal solution is to capture and securely contain him.
Reporters: Ryan Vitia of Machinery Hivemind; Major Leah Bellot of Bureau 8; and Purifier Valentine de Lacourt of the Inquisition.

Chapter 109: Minute Hope

Days earlier, beneath the crimson "peak," adjacent to the warped "city wall."

Lumian knelt on the ground, gazing up at the enigmatic woman as she approached.

Her words echoed in his ears, only to gradually grow muffled.

Lumian's hands pressed against the ground, clenching the soil as if attempting to crush it into liquid.

As the mysterious woman halted about a meter away, he scrambled to his feet, anxiety gripping his voice, "Didn't you say there's still hope? Didn't you claim Aurore and the others could be saved if I broke out of the loop myself?"

His voice grew hoarser with each word.

The enigmatic woman remained silent, her eyes filled with pity as she gazed at him.

Lumian hesitated before asking, hope lacing his words, "There's still hope, right?

"That's not just a fleeting dream. During my discussion with Aurore, she spoke of things I had never heard of—like how the description of an honorific name can hint at two separate entities!"

His eyes locked onto the woman, fear and hope battling as he scrutinized her every move.

At last, she nodded.

"There is indeed hope."

Lumian's eyes brightened, waiting for her to elaborate.

In a gentle voice, the woman explained, "In truth, Aurore has already died, but mystically, she's not entirely gone.

"Do you recall the soft, faint sounds you hear from within your body each time you perform the Summoning Dance? Do you remember the light fragments from Aurore and the others that flew into your chest on the twelfth night ritual?"

"Are those their Spirit Bodies, their voices?" Lumian interrupted, eagerness filling his voice.

The woman responded, a mix of calm and pity, "They can only be considered soul fragments.

"At the end of the twelfth night, you became a conduit for the hidden entity to unleash its horrifying power. The surrounding believers, including the soul fragments of the sacrifice, were absorbed by you. Guillaume Bénet, who led the ritual, was the sole exception.

"Later, those soul fragments and the potent corruptive power were sealed in the left side of your chest by my lord.

"That's why, as you became increasingly 'awake' in your dreams and sensed the date and loop more clearly, Aurore and the other villagers seem more and more lifelike. They even displayed a degree of self-awareness and cognition.
"To truly awaken from the dream and restrain the looping power consuming the ruins, you had to rely on yourself. You had to find the courage to confront the pain, face the truth, and chase after the elusive hope.
"If I were to resolve it, there's only one option: to completely annihilate you and the ruins of Cordu. Otherwise, the corruption within you will seep out uncontrollably, and Aurore and the others will truly perish in the realm of mysticism."
As the mysterious woman mentioned the twelfth-night ritual, Lumian couldn't help but remember.
A sharp pain stabbed his head, and only a few images surfaced.
Aurore, with vacant eyes, shoved him away from the altar.
Beams of light burst from Aurore and the villagers, spiraling into the vortex on his chest.
Guillaume Bénet, the padre, revealed a shocked expression as he fled the altar.
Beyond that, Lumian couldn't recall anything else. Only the events within the dream were clear, as if some force prevented him from remembering the rest.
His face contorted, his body trembling.
"I-I can't remember much..."
The woman nodded.
"That's normal. Firstly, it's a subconscious self-protection to prevent an overload of painful memories and intense scenes from causing you to collapse and lose control. Secondly, there are things you haven't witnessed and don't know the truth about. I don't know either.
"Yes, I'll need you to do something in Trier eventually. There are one, no, two exceptional psychologists I know there. I can arrange an appointment for you and see who's available to treat you. They can help you remember more and reconstruct the events in Cordu as much as possible."
Lumian's emotions roiled as he listened, but all he could muster was a soft, "Thank you..."
Fists clenched, he asked anxiously, "Then what can I do to bring Aurore and the others back?"
The woman sighed, admitting, "I don't know either."
Seeing Lumian's eyes darken, she added, "But you have to believe that true miracles exist in this world.
"And the great existence I mentioned earlier is synonymous with

Miracle."
Despair and hope swelled in Lumian's heart.
Though he knew the mysterious woman before him was likely offering comfort and hope, he couldn't help but say, "You said that once I unlocked the secret of the dream, you'd tell me the honorific name of that great existence."
Her expression grew solemn, her tone serious.
"I'll tell you now. Remember it well.
"His honorific name is: The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck."
As she spoke, Lumian felt his consciousness slipping, as if he could see a thin gray fog and a looming castle above it.
A gaze weighed upon him.
Simultaneously, the entire village of Cordu shuddered as the thin fog engulfing the area receded rapidly.
By the time Lumian regained clarity, sunlight had already filtered through the sky, casting golden specks upon the crimson mountain peak and desolate earth.
Lumian recalled the three lines of the honorific name and his conversation with Aurore in his dream.
He winced, a bitter smile forming as he said, "I thought there'd be a description of the past, present, and future."
The enigmatic woman in the orange dress tersely acknowledged his remark.
"There should be another one in the future, but if I use a description other than the three lines to pray to Him now, I can't guarantee the response will be from Him.
"You should know that such a situation is very dangerous."
Silent for a few seconds, Lumian then asked, a glint of hope in his eyes, "If I work diligently for you, can I eventually summon that great being to resurrect Aurore?"
"That's one way," the woman said softly. "You can also explore other methods. I won't stop you. I'm merely reminding you that many resurrection techniques have grave flaws."
Lumian nodded, signaling his understanding.
He didn't dare to inquire, yet couldn't help but ask, "Is there a significant chance of resurrection?"
The enigmatic woman glanced at him and sighed.
"It's very, very slim, but I know you'll still pursue it."
Lumian pressed his lips together, remaining silent.
It wasn't that he didn't want to assure her he'd do everything in his power to find a way to bring Aurore back, but he feared that speaking would reveal the sorrow surging within his heart.

After a few seconds, he asked in a raspy voice, "What do you need me to do in Trier?"
"Join a covert organization and help me gather some intel," the woman replied simply. "I'll tell you how to contact them once you're in Trier."
She added, "Besides uncovering the truth from your memories, you can also look into the 'survivors' of this catastrophe."
"Survivors?" Lumian's eyes narrowed.
The woman nodded.
"Besides you, there are five others: Madame Pualis, Béost, Louis Lund, Cathy, who left Cordu before the twelfth night, and Guillaume Bénet, who was protected by the ritual as its host. They escaped before this place was completely destroyed."
"The padre is still alive?" Lumian's lips curled up.
The enigmatic lady locked eyes with him and said, "If my divination is accurate, they should be hiding somewhere in Trier."
"Very good." Lumian smiled, wiping the corners of his eyes.
The woman then looked at Ryan, Leah, and Valentine, who slept near the room's edge on the thorny city wall, and asked Lumian, "What do you plan to do with them?
"If they leave alive, you'll undoubtedly be hunted by Bureau 8, Machinery Hivemind, and the Inquisition.
"From now on, you can only hide. You'll never live openly under the sun. You'll be forever accompanied by darkness, filth, and danger."
Lumian glanced at Ryan and the others, chuckling hoarsely.
"Will killing them bring Aurore back?"
The woman shook her head.
"No."
Lumian scoffed, bowing his head with his eyes closed.
Soon, he looked up and asked, "What's the name of the organization I'm about to join? How should I contact you once I'm in Trier?"
The woman sighed faintly.
"I'll tell you when the time comes.
"I'll give you my messenger's summoning method and the corresponding medium later. Contact me through that."
Lumian fell quiet for a moment before posing another question. "Did I possess the power to trap Cordu in a loop?"
"Strictly speaking, you didn't. At least not before receiving the Circle Inhabitant boon," the woman explained casually. "This place is corrupted by that hidden being everywhere, and the power level sealed in your left chest is quite high. Therefore, when your emotions fluctuate and you're in a subconscious state, you can

mobilize the corresponding specialness to reset this place." She paused, adding, "However, you've always been physically in a loop.
"The corruption sealed within your body allows you to reset your form at 6 a.m. every day and return to 6 a.m. on the twelfth night. Only changes brought about by Beyonder characteristics and boons are retained."
Is this the real reason why I recover every time I wake up from injuries in the ruins? No wonder I didn't starve to death... Lumian immediately understood.
He glanced at his body, a self-deprecating smile forming.
"It'll always be that day..."
That nightmarish day.
Without waiting for the woman's response, he looked up and asked, "How should I address you?"
She smiled, beginning to reply, "You can call me..."
Before she could finish, cards suddenly danced in the air.
Each card bore a unique pattern, fluttering towards Lumian.
Instinctively, Lumian extended his right hand, attempting to catch some of the cards.
At that moment, most of the cards vanished, leaving just one.
The card gently settled in Lumian's palm, face-up. It depicted a figure extending their scepter into the sky and pointing at the ground with their left hand.
Tarot card—Magician!
Lumian glanced up in shock, realizing the enigmatic woman had disappeared.
Should I call her Madam Magician? Lumian subconsciously flipped the tarot card in his hand, revealing rows of minute Intis script:
"The spirit that wanders about the unfounded, an upper world creature that is friendly to humans, a messenger that belongs solely to Magician."
Lumian studied the words for a moment before tucking the tarot card away.
He glanced at Ryan and the others, then turned around and staggered away from the area.
As he walked, Lumian couldn't help but look back at the blood-stained mountain peak and the twisted, thorny city wall.
The Cordu in his memory had already morphed into this. It bore no resemblance to what it once was, but Lumian still tried his best to observe and search, hoping to overlap the scene in his mind with reality.
He wanted to take another look at the giant atop the mountain, but he knew that it would cause him grave harm.
Unwittingly, Lumian slowly circled the blood-stained mountain

peak and thorny city wall, his gaze constantly scanning the distorted and chaotic objects.
He knew what he was looking for, and he knew he would never find it.
Just like that, Lumian arrived at the spot where the wooden wall had blocked him.
Most of the area had collapsed, revealing the garden behind it.
The garden was lush and vibrant, a stark contrast to the blood-stained "peak," the warped "city wall," and the ruins on the other side.
In the center was a brown wooden crib, reminiscent of the one Lumian had seen in Madame Pualis's castle.
He subconsciously leaned over and realized that there was a small human-shaped indentation on the slightly aged white cotton swaddling cloth in the crib. It was as if a baby had once lain here, but its whereabouts were now unknown.
What does this mean? Just as this thought crossed Lumian's mind, he felt the sunlight shining down from the sky grow much brighter.
He instinctively looked up and saw golden flames completely engulfing the mountaintop.
The three-headed, six-armed giant loomed in the inferno, seemingly melting.
Lumian stared blankly for a few seconds before suddenly raising his hands to shield his face.
The "sunlight" was too intense.
...
In the semi-subterranean two-story building at the edge of the ruins.
Lumian trudged to his sister's bedroom with the 237 verl d'or and 46 coppet he had collected. He grabbed a brown suitcase filled with clothes and memorabilia and pushed open the door.
He was here to say goodbye.
As soon as he stepped in and saw the desk with the manuscripts, his head throbbed as an image surfaced.
Aurore's eyes darted around, no longer vacant. She looked at Lumian, who had been pushed away, and said with difficulty,
"My notebook..."
Grande Soeur's witchcraft notebook? *Is there important information in it?* Lumian pressed his forehead, walked to the desk, and opened the drawer below.
Familiar dark notebooks greeted his eyes.
He suddenly remembered that Aurore had taught him a great deal of mysticism knowledge before Cordu was destroyed.

...
In Dariège, at the steam locomotive station.
The ticket agent eyed Lumian and asked, "Where are your identification documents?"
"I forgot," replied Lumian, clad in a linen shirt, a dark jacket, and a round-rimmed black hat, as he held a brown suitcase.
He then turned and walked away from the window.
A short man in a half-top hat and black suit approached Lumian, whispering, "Do you want to take the courier carriage? It's headed for Bigorre."
"Does it require identification?" Lumian inquired.
The short man chuckled, responding, "No need. Our business is about to be crushed by the steam locomotive. Why would we need identification documents?
"So, are you taking it or not? This is the last remnant of romance from the classical era!"
Lumian gave a slight nod and asked, "How much?"
The short man's enthusiasm flared.
"20 verl d'or to Bigorre, takes about a day. There are five stops in between. Each stop allows for a rest, changing carriage drivers and horses. Two of the stops also provide free food."
Without further questions, Lumian followed the short man to a deserted street nearby.
A large carriage drawn by four horses was parked at the roadside.
Upon boarding, Lumian discovered the interior was rather spacious. Like the public carriage, it had two rows separated by an aisle, as well as space for larger luggage.
He found a seat by the window, placed his suitcase down, and pulled out a book with a dark red cover.
As the horses neighed outside, Lumian flipped through the book, illuminated by sunlight streaming through the window.
Beside him sat a man in his thirties with a well-groomed mustache, brown hair, blue eyes, and smart attire.
He glanced at the book in Lumian's hand, asking with interest, "Eternal Love? Aurore Lee's book? The one featuring the female lead named Kingsley and the male lead named Ciel?"
"Yes." Lumian nodded.
The mustached man became chatty.
"This book is Aurore Lee's earliest work. The writing was quite amateurish, particularly the dialogue between characters. It doesn't sound like something people would say in real life at all. It's so emotional, it's uncomfortable."
"Indeed." Lumian nodded again.
He bowed his head and flipped to the last few pages of the book,

his gaze resting on the relevant passage.
"On her deathbed, Kingsley clutched Ciel's outstretched hand and gazed at his anguished expression. She forced a smile and said with difficulty, 'Stupid, live well.'"
(End of Part 1—Nightmare)